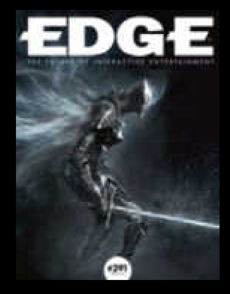

PARAGON QUANTUM BREAK KNIGHTS & BIKES
EDGE®
THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
DARK SOULS III
EXCLUSIVE: HOW HIDETAKA MIYAZAKI REKINDLED THE FLAME
REVIEWED
STREET FIGHTER V
FAR CRY PRIMAL
UNRAVEL
THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD
DYING LIGHT: THE FOLLOWING
#291
APRIL 2016



It's terrible! And incredible! And everything in between



Exclusive subscriber edition

In the recently published Dark Souls II: Design Works, FromSoftware art director **Daisuke Satake** talks of how players responded to certain aspects of the game's shimmering Looking Glass Knight boss. "I heard a lot of people say that they loved [the character's] wings," he says, "though my personal favourite aspect was the head. You never know exactly what people are going to like." It's a good illustration of how the landscape has changed for videogame designers and artists, unbound by the power of modern technology and given the freedom to express themselves in ways that were once unthinkable. Many years ago, we could be more objective: a chunky, super-low-resolution piece of art either looked like what it was supposed to represent – a shield, a postbox, a table lamp – or it did not, leaving little room for interpretation. Today, a game's value, from the construction of its environments to its lead characters' outfits and even the way they wear their hair, exists much more in the eyes of the beholder – and naturally the world of videogames is a more textured place for it.

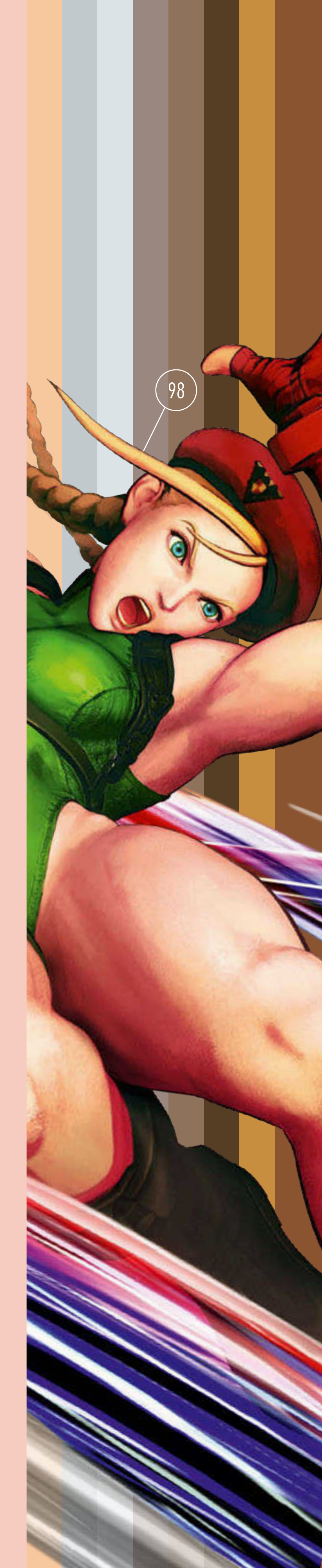
It can put game developers in some awkward positions, however. "I'm really excited for this game," one forum user posted having watched *Dark Souls III*'s intro trailer in early February, "but that was a disappointing opening…" The appraisal was followed 27 minutes later by a contrasting view from another contributor: "Way to blow my fucking socks off. I am so ready for April 12th." Where do you go when faced with feedback such as this? (Other than straight to the local pub, presumably.)

It's especially rough for FromSoftware, which in *Dark Souls* has created a game series capable of stirring up fan emotions like few others, ensuring that its work is scrutinised to an extraordinary degree. But there is irony here in that these games have always encouraged players to consume them in their own distinct ways, offering no single route or methodology for success, and grey areas aplenty. On p62 we look at what we'll be facing as we try to work out our own approach to *Dark Souls III*.



games







Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for additional content



Follow these links throughout the magazine for more content online

#291

sections

APRIL 2016

Knowledge

Dispatches

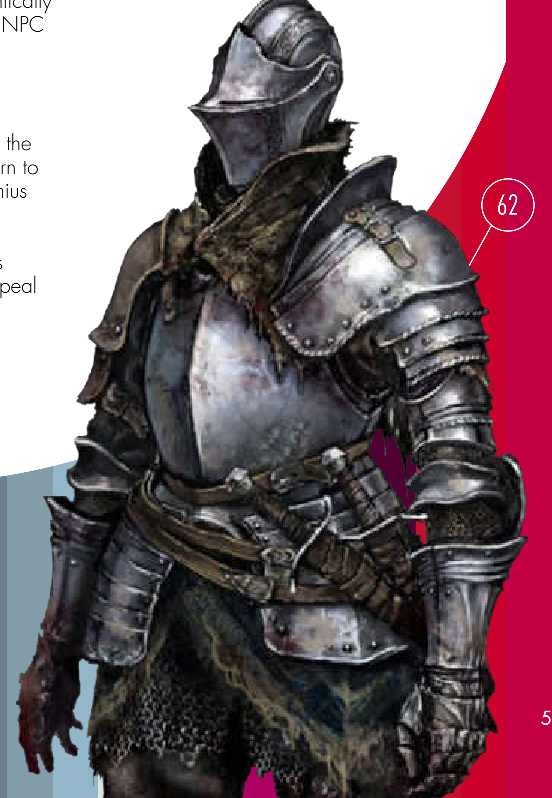
Features

74

86

80

62





EDITORIAL

Tony Mott editor in chief **Nathan Brown** deputy editor
Ben Maxwell writer **Andrew Hind** art editor

CONTRIBUTORS

Elizabeth Elliott, Will Freeman, Ben Griffin, James Leach, Keza MacDonald, Emmanuel Pajón, Simon Parkin, Steven Poole, Chris Schilling, Joe Skrebels, Chris Thursten, Alvin Weetman

ADVERTISING

Steven Pyatt account manager (+44 (0)1225 687713 steven.pyatt@futurenet.com)
Michael Pyatt advertising manager **Andrew Church** advertising director
Clare Dove commercial sales director

CONTACT US

+44 (0)1225 442244 edge@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS

UK reader order line and enquiries 0844 8482852
Overseas reader order line and enquiries +44 1604 250145
Online enquiries www.myfavouritemagazines.com
Email edge@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

MARKETING

Laura Driffield group marketing manager **Kristianne Stanton** marketing manager

CIRCULATION

Juliette Winyard trade marketing manager (+44 (0)7551 150984)

LICENSING

Regina Erak senior licensing and syndication manager (regina.erak@futurenet.com)
Tel: +44 (0)1225 442244 Fax (yes, really, fax): +44 (0)1225 732275

PRODUCTION & DISTRIBUTION

Mark Constance production manager **Nola Cokely** production controller **Jo Gay** ad production controller

MANAGEMENT

Matthew Pierce editorial director, games, photography, creative & design **Rodney Dive** group senior art editor
Joe McEvoy managing director, magazine division **Nial Ferguson** content and marketing director

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future. Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT (+44 (0)207 4294000). Overseas distribution by Seymour International.

Want to work for Future? Visit www.futurenet.com/jobs

Future, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA United Kingdom
Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275



Future is an award-winning international media group and leading digital business. We reach more than 49 million international consumers a month and create world-class content and advertising solutions for passionate consumers online, on tablet & smartphone and in print.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).
www.futureplc.com

Chief executive Zillah Byng-Maddick
Non-executive chairman Peter Allen
Chief financial officer Richard Haley

Tel +44 (0)207 0424000 (London)
Tel +44 (0)1225 442244 (Bath)



We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from well managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. Future Publishing and its paper suppliers have been independently certified in accordance with the rules of the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council).





Specialist Magazine Of The Year

Virtually here

VRUK, the UK's largest virtual reality conference, reveals the unprecedented reach of the technology

Videogames are often at the forefront of technological shifts, as has been the case with 3D visuals, innovations in interfaces or simply the drive for raw, consumer-accessible processing power. But the most striking thing about the lineup for the UK's largest virtual reality conference to date, VRUK, taking place at London's Ravensbourne college, is its wide-reaching diversity. Here cinematographers, educators, advertisers, visual artists, and representatives from charities and ministerial departments all rub shoulders. There are even a few game-makers in among them.

It's indicative of an unprecedented rush of support for a technology that's yet to prove itself, but which harbours a greater potential for cultural change than any in recent memory. It's a benevolent gold rush in which prospectors are happy to share ideas and strategies in service of the greater good, and one that has driven an accelerated hardware development cycle to rival smart devices' annual churn.

As if to justify this latent potential, the first day of the conference kicks off with some big numbers. Dean Johnson, head of innovation at creative agency Brandwidth, follows a welcoming introduction from Ravensbourne director Linda Drew with a primer on VR's current position, citing an investment of £500 million in VR and AR projects during 2015, topped up with a further £550 million funding round for Magic Leap at the start of 2016. By 2020, the mavens say, VR and AR will be worth over £100 billion – and this is in the context of the UK creative industry's £84.1 billion annual worth across all sectors.

The broad gathering of representatives from various industries is an encouraging show of force that goes some way to mitigating fears of a repeat of 3DTV's Betamax-like trajectory. According to SCEE Immersive Technology Group senior designer **Jed Ashforth** – who is tasked with guiding the evolution of PlayStation VR – there's a straightforward reason for this widespread confidence.

"VR is the destination that all these technologies have been heading to; it's not an intermediary step on the way," he explains after delivering a talk on PlayStation VR game design. "3D, motion control, binaural audio – all of these things are necessary for VR. All of them are technologies that were the 'hot thing' for a while, but eventually cooled off. But they're all essential building blocks for VR, and without videogames having explored those technologies in the past, and facing up to their challenges, we wouldn't be in such an advanced position to make VR today.

"I've been around VR and this industry a long time, and this alignment of so many different industries, and so many parties within each industry, all pointing in the same direction and helping each other, sharing knowledge and expertise and insight – it's unprecedented."

"So many parties in each industry sharing knowledge and expertise and insight – it's unprecedented"

But with so many industries and creatives now getting involved in a technology for which the playbook and vernacular are yet to be established, there's greater risk of poor VR experiences – a problem more pronounced than in any other industry given the potential for missteps to cause nausea, headaches or injured shins. **Henry Stuart**, co-founder and CEO of VR specialist production company Visualise, addresses the problem in his talk 'Respecting Your Viewer and Other Rules of Great VR'.

In among familiar pointers such as maintaining a stable viewpoint, and trying not to break the user's sense of presence, he underscores the need to more aggressively push back against clients – be they advertisers or game publishers – with unrealistic expectations that might result in an uncomfortable VR experience, and by extension delay the target consumer's adoption of VR.

The game industry has done much of the groundwork in this respect, but as more sectors look to employ and shape VR, how big a part will games play in defining a broadening ruleset? "The biggest," Stuart asserts. "I really believe that. I don't think people are going to be buying the headsets to watch films or music events yet, because there's not an established amount of content at this point. It's not nearly as well-established as the gaming industry is. Sony has already got millions of PlayStations out there, so in terms of the next step for getting into VR, buying a headset isn't a big leap. So I think Sony is going to have a huge part to play later in the year when it releases PlayStation VR. And [VR software] doesn't necessarily have to be a game, documentary or film – it can be an *experience*. Something totally different, where you're immersed somewhere and can interact with things – that's something that doesn't even have a name yet."

The many short-form tech demos that fit into this definition – standing on the bow of a sunken ship while watching ▶

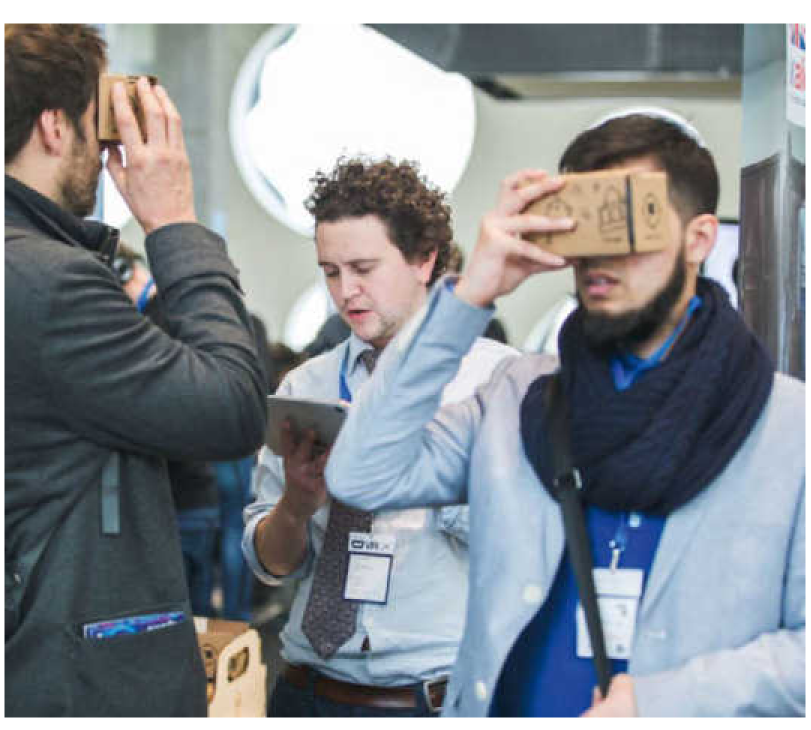


CONSOLE YOURSELF
While Rift and Vive represent the cutting edge of VR, Chris Etches of Fourthwall believes that the tech's flashpoint will come from more modest hardware. "I think the Rift 2, whenever that comes out – by which time we'll all have more powerful PCs – will be a valid gaming platform in the same way that a successful console would be," he says. "But VR won't have its Nintendo Wii moment until… well, perhaps until Nintendo do VR. They could be the ones. Or perhaps whatever HoloLens [above] finally becomes. Everyone went and bought a Wii for their gran because they were told it was amazing. That equivalent VR platform probably doesn't exist yet, and I'm convinced it has to be standalone. Technology-wise, we're still way off being able to deliver that."





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE **VRUK occupied every even-numbered floor of Ravensbourne college; a common reaction in VRUK's Immersion Zone; Google claims to have shipped five million Cardboard viewers; HTC's Vive Pre was on show, along with this older, but still popular, relative**





DEAL BREAKER

How immersion, and presence, will trickle down to mobile



While GearVR offers a pared-down version of virtual reality, increasingly more efficient and powerful mobile devices should see the gap close in the near future. "One of the most important things in VR is the ability to move your whole body, not just your head," says Stuart. "Currently you only get that on the higher-end machines, but in the future there'll be inside-out tracking on mobile-phone-based devices that can scan the room you're in, take that data back in and then tell the content that you're moving your whole body. It's incredibly processor-heavy at the moment, but in the future the mobile phone side of the market, given powerful enough processors, will be able to compete with what Oculus and HTC can do."







CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT **Using full-fat VR is clunky, and that's before you factor in something such as Virtuix's Omni; Samsung's GearVR is currently the best commercially available VR headset; as well as key talks, VRUK provides numerous workshops**



FIRST PERSON
Virtual reality shouldn't be looked at as a way to create more immersive versions of existing genres, Ashforth believes. "You can't frame genres in the same way you used to, as the experience they offer in VR can be very different. My feeling is that it's more natural, more immersive, less about emulating the experience through abstract mechanics and more about *you* aiming and ducking and reloading, just like in real life. You don't empathise with your avatar so much as inhabit it. People say, 'Look at *my* hands. Look at *my* body!' They frame it as themselves being there in the scene. That's a fundamentally different viewpoint than most entertainment experiences offer."

whales swim past, for example, or playing around with tiny robots in a doll's house – also represent the most likely point of confluence as the borders that separate documentaries, film, music and videogames begin to disintegrate.

"The majority of our work – 60 per cent – is brands and advertising," Stuart explains. "But it's happening already with us where we're having to fuse videogame engines with 360-degree video content. I mean, I remember the early days when they started putting cinematic content in videogames – first it was cutscenes, and since then it's gradually become more and more integrated. Virtual reality could be like that, but it can go anywhere – it can go crazy from here."

It's a line of thinking that echoes throughout the conference. Jaunt VR's Michael Frackers discusses the challenges of creating cinematic VR, while Masters Of Pie founder Matt Ratcliffe charts the evolution of storytelling from campfires to the concept of a holodeck. William Latham, visual artist and former CEO of *The Thing* and *Evolva* studio Computer Artworks Ltd, muses on what VR environments could do for his Organic Art software. And as if VR's broad appeal hadn't been underscored enough, the BBC's Christopher Nundy discusses the process of placing viewers at the centre of Strictly Come Dancing's dancefloor. Interactivity and presence, it would seem, will soon no longer be the clear-cut differentiators for videogames.

As borders between art forms increasingly break down, and other media formats take on the production requirements more commonly associated with videogames, there are key lessons that can be learned from game makers' experience. But among these lessons are new challenges for studios, too, as set out in an enlightening presentation from Rebellion marketing and PR manager Robbie Cooke. While an industry famed for crunch cycles and poor diets isn't known for its concern with employees' health, Cooke reveals that the *Sniper Elite* and *Battlezone 98 Redux* studio has had to draw up guidelines for developers working with pre-release code – bugs and framerate issues are more than an irritation if you're strapped into a headset. To this end, Rebellion limits its team to 20-minute test sessions, builds in UI warnings (a big green tortoise flashes up on screen when the refresh rate is misbehaving), and discourages commuters from driving or riding home straight after wearing a headset. But disoriented employees can also be a boon, he points out, as particularly sensitive devs (or, as he calls them, "canaries") will represent a large portion of your audience. Ensure that what you're making is comfortable for them, and you'll likely be in a good position when the game ships.

> "At this age they just think, 'Of course Daddy's got magic goggles where I can see my pet dinosaur'"

One demographic that shouldn't have any trouble acclimatising is children. Fourthwall, which worked on Mattel's VR update of the classic View-Master and is currently developing a pet-care game called *Dream Horse*, is one of the few studios focusing on the younger market. Company founder **Chris Etches** is confident that the sector will grow rapidly, and kids will adopt VR tech as quickly as they have touchscreens.

"The first version of *Dream Horse* had a dinosaur because I happened to have a dinosaur model lying around," he tells us after hosting a kids' VR game design workshop. "My daughter's only three, but she loved it. At this age they just think, 'Of course Daddy's got magic goggles where I can go see my pet dinosaur.' Very quickly, boys and girls who've played Tamagotchi or any pet-care games are going to get this."

But designing VR games for children comes with an additional set of problems – not least the perceived health risks. "The View-Master is a smart move by Mattel," Etches continues. "There's no head strap, and no drilled hole for headphone jacks, because you're not *supposed* to wear headphones, you're not *supposed* to keep it on your head. This is for holding



VRUK's Immersion Zone, split across two floors and featuring a wide selection of VR game and tech demos

to your face for a couple of minutes, and then putting down. Loads of these have sold – it's a valid platform on its own."

While purists might dismiss the VR credentials of devices such as View-Master and Google's Cardboard, they represent the most affordable and accessible way to get VR into people's hands, and by virtue of limiting immersion are intrinsically social. Kids and adults can pass them around easily – one of the first things *Dream Horse* players want to do, Etches reveals, is show other children their steed.

"You go to VR forums and there are endless boring conversations going, 'Oh, it's not VR unless it's 90Hz, 1080p each eye, etc," Etches says. "But I don't care about that – if you've got something that can be played by kids, then it's blatantly going to be playable by a causal audience as well. I know this sounds trite, but I genuinely want to make the *FarmVille* of VR. I don't mean in the sense of nickel-and-diming our customers for every cent, or what Zynga became in the end. But we all laughed when *FarmVille* appeared; we said, 'Oh my god, I could make that in an afternoon. It looks so crappy.' We didn't get it – they knew exactly what they were doing. And all those people who didn't get games got that. That's who it was targeted at. And in the end you have to hold your hand up and say, well, good on 'em."

Whoever a game is targeted at, the need to enable users to share an experience that requires them to be isolated remains a key problem.

"With PlayStation VR we've really focused on this aspect," Ashforth says. "We've really tried to include social features, like our Screen Mirror Mode and Separate Screen Mode, that are going to help people get involved and play together with their friends."

It's more than just a service to family members and friends on the outside of an HMD, it's a concerted attempt to kickstart the buzz that VR will need to take root, and to address the very real image problem – exemplified by *that* Palmer Luckey Time cover – that VR has to surmount. But those are commercial problems for the immediate future, and while many industry voices continue to loudly proclaim 2016 as the "year of VR", the truth is that it will likely take a little longer to really gain purchase. Tempered expectations aside, VRUK demonstrates the technology's unwavering, uniform backing from every conceivably interested party, and that alone should be enough to sustain it while it shifts from curious gimmick to must-have technology in the eyes of the rest of the world. But it's also undeniable that trying it leaves a lasting impression that's unlike that of any other media.

"I think, as always with a brand-new user experience, there's going to be a snowball effect," Ashforth reasons. "One of the biggest challenges with VR is that, like the Matrix, you can't be told what it is; you really do have to experience it for yourself. I've run hundreds and hundreds of demos of VR for people over the past few years and there's always this great excitement when people come out of playing it. You can see people, in the space of a few moments, they get it. The grin spreads across their face, and it just blows their world wide open. It does a fantastic job of selling itself." ■

London calling

A new ten-day festival is aiming to connect the game industry with the general public

The UK's capital city has long been served by events that celebrate the creative industries, such as London Fashion Week and the London Film Festival. Now games are being given their chance to enjoy the urban spotlight.

A new London Games Festival will take place on April 1–10 at various venues across the capital, and its organisers hope it will share its subject matter with a broad demographic sweep, from dedicated players to families and those with little or no experience of interactive entertainment.

The event is being put together by a newly formed organisation, Games London, itself a collaboration between videogame trade body UKIE and the longstanding Film London, the capital's strategic agency for film and media. Backed by a £1.2 million investment from the Mayor of London's London Enterprise Panel, the festival organisers promise a gathering point for consumers and industry alike, and one that leaves a lasting legacy.

"We're establishing a brand-new annual event for London and the UK, which this country's lacked since the demise of ECTS," says **Michael French**, senior games programme executive for Games London and the London Games Festival. "If you look at the global games calendar, you know San Francisco has GDC, and E3 is in LA. In August everyone goes to Germany for Gamescom, and you've got things like Tokyo Game Show in September. Paris Games Week has now established itself in October. Why doesn't the UK have something like that – a moment of our own? We should have one, and [London Games Festival] could be it."

French and his team recognise they won't change the UK public's perception of games in ten days, but if they can replicate the impact of those giant conferences over time, they may be in with a chance of helping cement games as part of the fabric of UK culture.

There have been events named 'London Games Festival' before, the last of which took place in 2012. However, the 2016 event is entirely unrelated – save for the odd tangential connection thanks to the relatively close-knit nature of the game industry in the UK.

The festival itself brings numerous gaming-themed events to the capital, covering talks, workshops, indie titles, award shows and perhaps even a spot of competitive gaming."We're also putting together a fringe of events, and inviting people to put on their own events as part of that fringe," French explains. "The stuff we're getting through – the suggestions in the applications – are really diverse, whether it's a *Hearthstone* tournament or a musical about a famous videogame."

"I think it's unfair to characterise the mayor's office as an organisation that wouldn't understand games"

This year the British Academy Games Awards, which has made efforts to be more accessible in recent years by throwing its doors open to the public, is also aligned to the festival, pointing to the clout of the organisations getting on board. But not every group pooling resources to curate the event is an immediately obvious fit. Film London, in particular, stands out. "What Film London does is what Games London will do, and it's been doing it for 13 years," French says. "It does a huge amount of work in terms of helping to grow the film business here, and there's a big argument to be made that people should be doing the same, but for the interactive entertainment sector."

THREE TO SEE
The London Games Festival lineup is still being finalised at the time of writing, but we've picked some of the events that are in place now and set to headline the festival:

Now Play This
Somerset House, April 1–3
A diverse range of workshops, talks and chances to play, covering digital, physical and tabletop games, with a range set to span the full spectrum, from niche to mainstream.

LGF @ BFI
BFI Southbank, April 4
A special one-day takeover of the BFI Southbank's main screening room offers a chance to explore VR and other areas where games and cinema are converging. The event will also present a variety of demos of UK-made games.

British Academy Games Awards
Tobacco Dock, April 7
BAFTA's annual award show celebrating the best of games and their makers, with tickets available to all those interested in attending.

What's more, French says, in an era when the technology, creative practice, studio structuring and even the companies of the film and game industries are starting to converge, the experience Film London has garnered in its time is increasingly relevant to games.

Then, of course, there's the role of the Mayor of London's London Enterprise Panel, even though Boris Johnson is perhaps the last person many would conjure to mind when it comes to videogames. "I think it's unfair to characterise the mayor's office as an organisation that wouldn't understand games," French asserts. "They're sat working in the capital city, they see how big the creative industries are, and they know how big the games sector is. They've been 100 per cent supportive of this, and are in daily contact with us about some of the ideas here. They've been very helpful with access and contacts. It's not just funding they provide; it's ideas and support. If anything, the mayor's team see this as overdue."

French is keen to stress, though, that this isn't a London-only event. "Everyone is welcome – it's not just about London companies," he says. "Game London has a London focus, but one of our stakeholders is a UK-wide trade body for the game industry. Anybody from the UK game industry is welcome to get involved, and we're showing plenty from the non-London UK games companies."

Full details of the festival are detailed at its official site, www.games.london. ■


BOSS
MAYOR
EXIT

Cold rush

Hardy Finnish devs head to Lapland's frozen woods for Survival Mode – a 48-hour game jam by candlelight

For most, the idea of creating a game in 48 hours is daunting enough, but the Finnish Game Jam association is keen to layer on more hardship. An FGJ-organised event in 2014 saw teams create their games in the cramped enclosure of a moving bus, and this year the association ramped things up even further for Survival Mode, in which game creators braved plummeting temperatures, dwindling battery power and, erm, nice warm saunas.

"We were thinking, what can we do that would be *very* Finnish?" University Of Tampere game researcher and lecturer (and FGJ president) **Annakaisa Kultima** explains. "There aren't that many northern sites for the Global Game Jam – our Rovaniemi site has been northernmost for a couple of years now, and we were thinking that maybe we could go even further. The original idea was to bring people on a skiing hike, because there's a network of empty cottages [in Lapland] that are looked after by the government."

The plan would've seen teams trek between cottages for the weekend, but severe conditions in the preceding fortnight – which saw temperatures reach -38°C and an experienced hiker lose his life – saw the 28-strong group hole up in a larger building previously used by lumberjacks. With a relatively balmy -10°C to contend with, the jam could proceed, but plenty of other challenges would present themselves.

"The cabin in the woods was 50 minutes away from civilisation," Kultima explains. "We didn't have electricity other than the generator that we brought, so people were using headlights and candles. People had their mobile devices, and Finland is pretty well covered – it's actually pretty difficult to get completely away from the Internet nowadays – but because the skies weren't that clear and we had a lot of snowfall, the Internet was really shaky. Some people were able to use their own devices, but others didn't have any network coverage at all. So some people were in a better situation than others were, depending on their service provider!"

> "It was 50 minutes from civilisation. We didn't have electricity other than the generator that we brought"

The group had three petrol-powered generators available, but two were there as backup (both in the event of a failure or if there was a miscalculation of how much power would be consumed), and devices could only be charged during scheduled breaks.

"It made you plan for working without your computer quite often," **Markus Pasula**, CEO and co-founder of Grand Cru Games, and Survival Mode participant, tells us. "So you think, I'm probably going to run out of laptop battery at this stage, so then will be a good time to go and do some photography. There were only three hours of sunlight, and I was shooting the 360-degree textures for the backgrounds – so I'd get the best quality if there was at least *some* daylight left. So trying to sync those times together with when I was out of battery on my laptop was important."

The lack of a continual power supply, daylight or guaranteed online resources forced the teams to become unusually resourceful. One group handled all of their coding on iPads using Codea, and Kultima believes that, thanks to a stash of external lithium batteries, the devs didn't make use of any of the event's supply of fuel. For visual resources, others used photography, drawings and even clay modelling – reserving their batteries until the whole lot was ready to be incorporated into the game at once. And then, of course, there was the sauna.

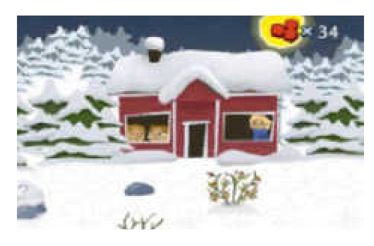


Game researcher and Finnish Game Jam president Annakaisa Kultima

"It was an old, wooden building – a traditional sauna with only one room for getting changed," Kultima says. "We all went for a sauna on the second night, and after a while most people had left. So I came out thinking, 'OK, now there's loads of room for me to get dressed.' But when I opened the changing room door, it was completely packed. Two people were sitting on one side – one doing voice acting, and the other recording – and then a huge audience on the other side giggling because the lines were pretty amusing. So people were cooling off and getting dressed, but still making games! So even though there were breaks, a lot of people just found ways to continue their work."

Kultima views the trip as a success, but also the first foray into potentially more extreme events. "It was a nice trip, but I wish it was harder! If you think about it, this group of people is used to playing games in which there are all sorts of unnecessary obstacles for you to overcome. So we're used to this kind of thinking – that it's kind of fun to have obstacles. So we'll definitely continue in pursuing extreme game jams, or at least other ridiculous constraints. You do get a little bit bored jamming regularly, so I think that this is something people are interested in, in order to see what kind of experiences you can have. I hope it inspires others, too – perhaps there will be a similar winter setting in Canada, for instance, or maybe a desert jam somewhere? I can't wait to see." ■









FROM TOP **You must avoid wolves and scavenge food in *Daddy, I'm Hungry*; Markus Pasula's team's *Sauna* is a VR horror survival game; the whole group sing in booze smuggler *Viinaralli Rajan Takaa***



The teams could only charge their devices during scheduled breaks, so had to carefully plan out their days and find ways to prolong battery life

Mikko Karsisto





"It's always good to get out of your normal routines, and limitations are always good for creativity," Pasula says. "And I hope that people are inspired in some way by what we did"

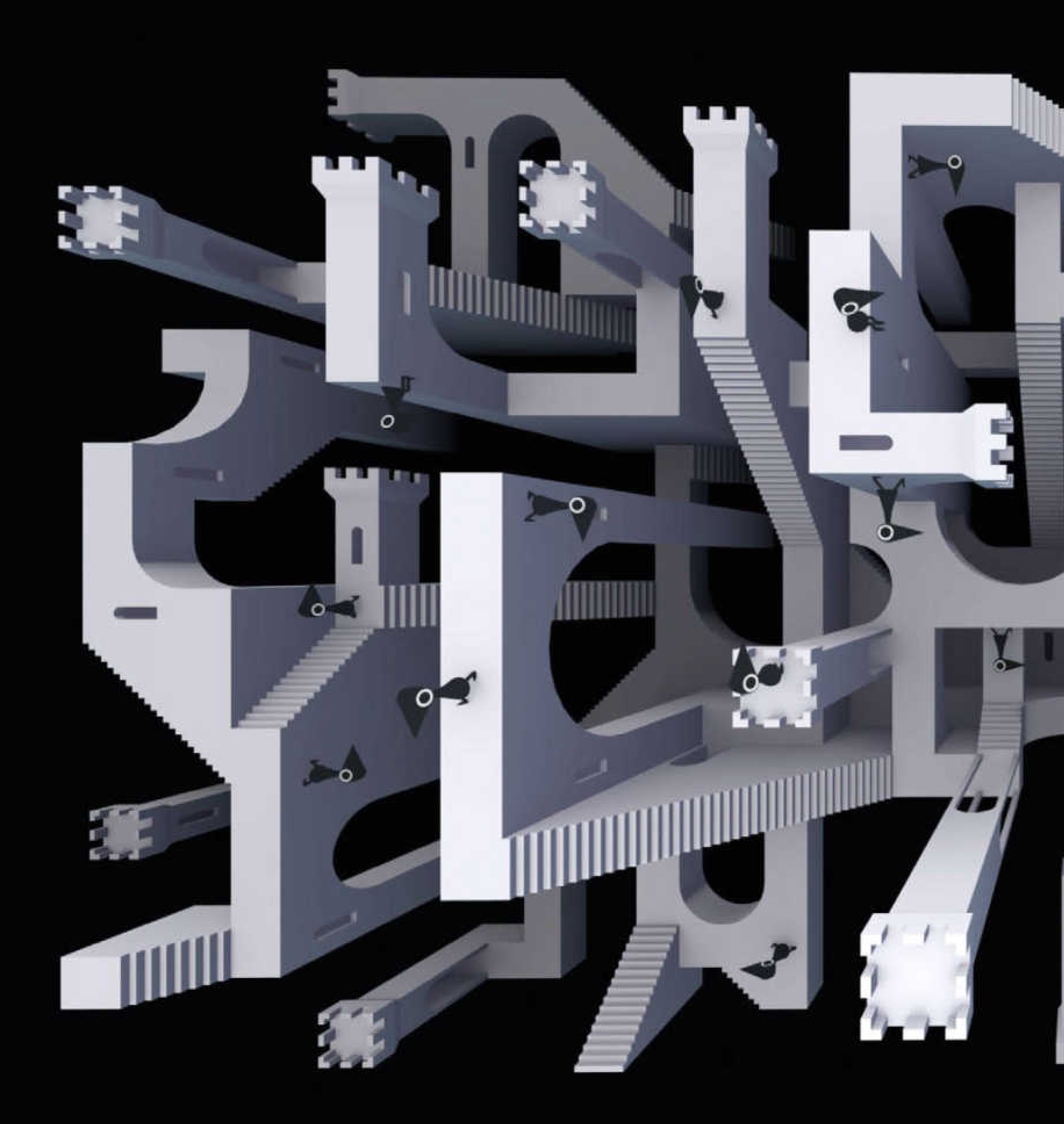


HEAT SINK

Looking for game ideas below a metre of surface ice



While most devs worked on multitasking in traditional development disciplines, Markus Pasula found a way to combine coding with another hobby: ice diving. "The week before the trip I was thinking that it'd already been a couple of weeks since my last dive, so where was I going to do my next one? And then I'm like, 'Hey, I'm going on this crazy trip to Lapland…' I was supposed to be working on the game the whole time, of course, but *maybe* there's a chance that I can find a team there that likes the idea of me shooting some underwater photography or video which we can build a game around. Luckily, it all came true!"

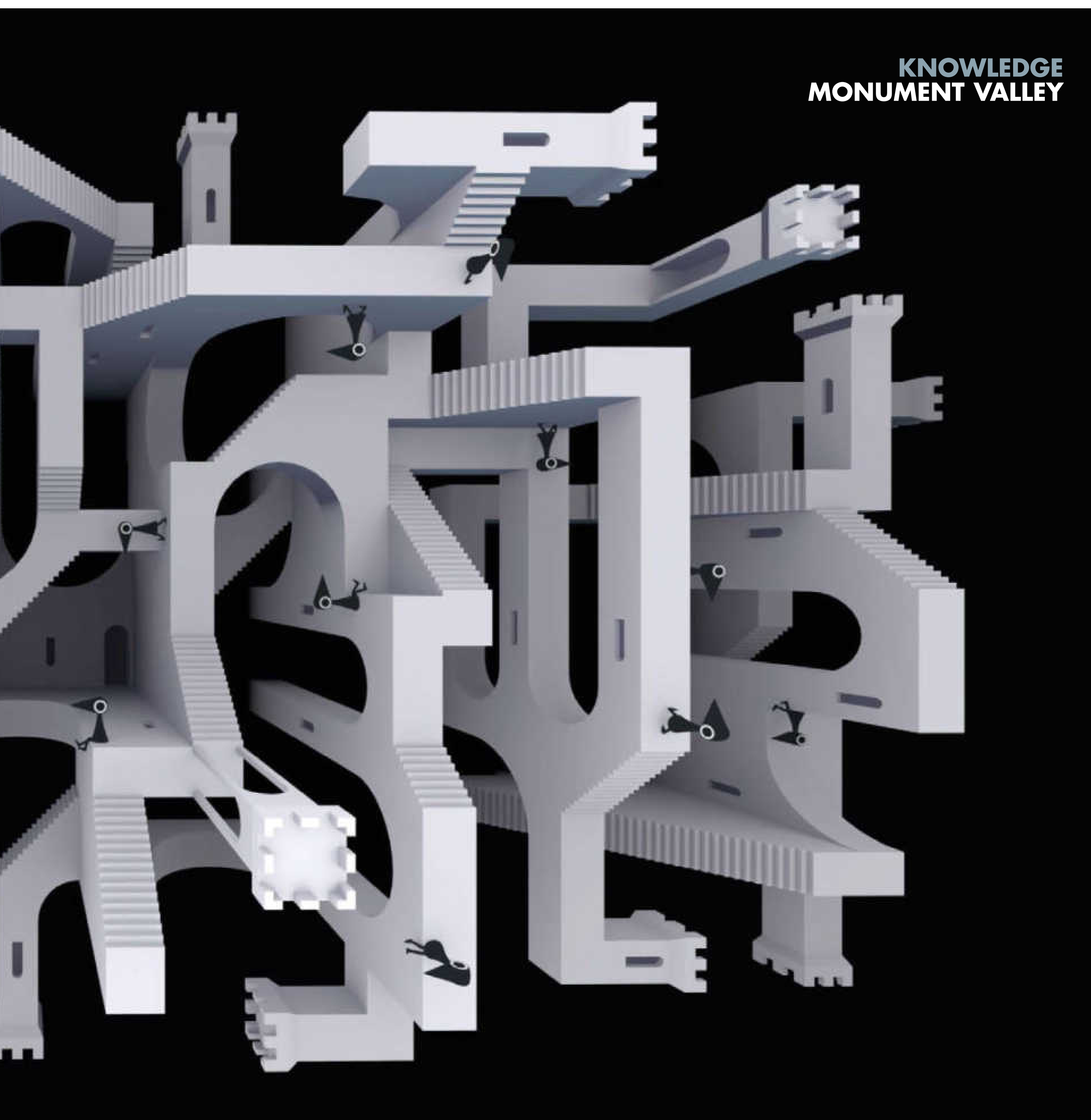


VALLEY OF THE SPINNED

UsTwo applies its aptitude for angles to Monument Valley's gatefold vinyl OST

The dizzying image on these pages is taken from the inside of the *Monument Valley* soundtrack's elaborate gatefold packaging. The design encloses a 31-track album split across blue and white 180g vinyl and features the music of Stafford Bawler, OBFUSC and Grigori. Developer UsTwo's effort joins the increasing ranks of vinyl videogame OST releases, which include *Fez*, *Journey* and *Super Hexagon*, and represents the self-proclaimed digital-product studio's desire to give its game a tangible presence beyond iTunes.

"Unfortunately, being an App Store game, *Monument Valley* has no way of existing in a physical form," notes UsTwo lead designer **Ken Wong**. "There are a lot of fans of *Monument Valley* – ourselves included – who want to have an artefact or a memento of the experience, something we can have in our homes and be part of our



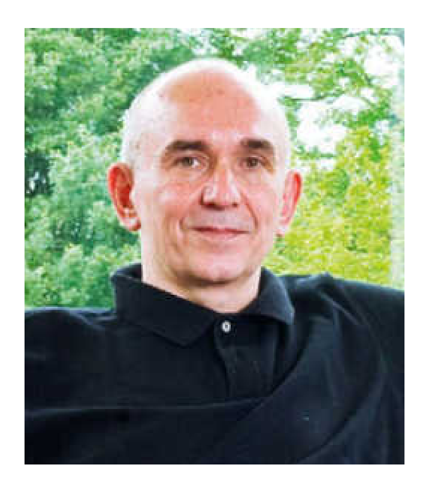
collections. And, of course, the music of *Monument Valley* is an incredibly important part of the experience, and is worth listening to in the highest possible quality. A vinyl set just seemed to make total sense."

The beautiful package features original art and includes a story booklet. But the task of depicting the game in a suitable manner proved more difficult than you might expect.

"*Monument Valley* images are incredibly hard to make, even when they're not functional levels," Wong says. "They require a very tight combination of illustration and graphic design. But we knew we wanted to go above and beyond for this double-vinyl package and create something really special, and the wide format of the gatefold interior was a chance to do something different. We traded the game's isometric view for a one-point perspective that breaks with [our] tradition, but has led to an image that's unique and yet still recognisably *Monument Valley*." The soundtrack album is available to preorder from Iam8bit for $40 (£28). Visit www.bit.ly/monumentvalleyOST for more details. ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"The idea of me hyping up a game, or talking about a game before it's available to the public, **I just don't think it's going to work ever again."**

We appreciate the sentiment, **Peter Molyneux**, but welcome to 2010



"We like phones and tablets because they offer us different experiences to PCs and consoles. **The same will happen with VR."**

Valve's **Chet Faliszek** overlooks the fact no one's getting a free Vive with a phone contract



"It is helpful to know what you know and know what you don't know, and in this case, I know what I think **but I don't know the answer to your question."**

A move into game dev hasn't changed former US defence secretary **Donald Rumsfeld**

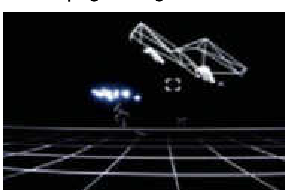
"The arts and sciences should no longer be **a question of either-or.** It is the combination by which world-changing companies are built."



Ian Livingstone continues on his one-man bid to fix the UK education system

ARCADE WATCH

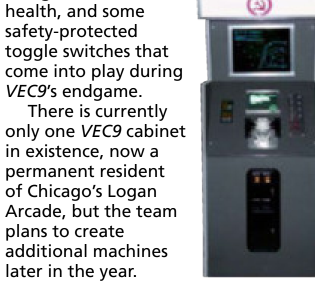
Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game *VEC9*
Manufacturer 68 Crew

Up until now, the most recent example of a vector-graphics arcade cabinet was Exidy's 1986 game *Top Gunner*. But thanks to programming group 68 Crew members Andrew Reitano, Michael Dooley and Todd Bailey, a modern machine has now supplanted it. *VEC9* sees players take on the role of a Soviet pilot who has been woken from 30 years of stasis in order to avenge an apparently fallen USSR.

The machine is built around an Electrohome G05 monitor, the same display found in the original *Asteroids* cabinet. But while the hardware may be authentic, the additional horsepower under the battleship-grey cabinet has allowed the team to create true 3D visuals which more closely resemble *Star Fox* than early vector games. Players steer their ship using the gunner controls from an M1 Abrams tank (the design of which pleasingly resembles the controller for Atari's 1985 vector machine *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*), and this heavy-duty military aesthetic is carried over to the rest of the cabinet. Those grey surfaces are broken up by a monochromatic, green second screen, a bank of ten incandescent industrial lights which provide feedback on your status, a row of red and green LEDs for health, and some safety-protected toggle switches that come into play during *VEC9*'s endgame.



There is currently only one *VEC9* cabinet in existence, now a permanent resident of Chicago's Logan Arcade, but the team plans to create additional machines later in the year.

My Favourite Game
Daniel Pemberton

The award-winning film and videogame composer on Speedball glories, slap-bass solos, and the joy of Taito's Chase HQ

Daniel Pemberton is an Ivor Novello-winning and multi-BAFTA-nominated composer responsible for scoring TV shows and films including Peep Show, The Man From UNCLE and Steve Jobs, as well as videogame soundtracks such as *LittleBigPlanet* and *The Movies*. Most recently he's worked with Rex Crowle on *Knights & Bikes*. Way before that, though, a 14-year-old Pemberton found himself doing a work experience placement under a game designer called Peter Molyneux.

That work experience must've been fun.
Yeah, that was weird! It was at Bullfrog, which was about seven or eight people at the time – before it got bought by EA – in a little cramped office in Guildford, designing levels for *Populous II*. And who would've known that little office would've spawned the Guildford gaming empire?

Did the music of the games you played as a kid have any influence on your development as a composer?
I wasn't mad on a lot of videogame music growing up. I definitely think it's interesting, but I always used to joke that every Sega game soundtrack was written by a guy who loves doing slap-bass solos. I think the first game musically I thought was really cool, and doing what I wanted videogame music to do, was *Xenon 2*. They brought in Bomb The Bass, and that was really exciting because it showed videogames could merge with all these other art forms and could have really great soundtracks. People probably know that track better now from that game than they would from the original release. Then, when *Wipeout* came out, I think that was the moment you could really see what you could do with the impact of music.

BEEN THERE, DAN THAT
After bumping into Peter Molyneux at an Xbox convention, Pemberton was invited to see what Lionhead was up to – a trip that led to his appointment as composer on *The Movies*, and him meeting Rex Crowle. He went on to work with Crowle on *LittleBigPlanet* and became good friends, and they're collaborating again on *Knights & Bikes*. Pemberton's also a prolific film and TV composer, and his latest work – the original soundtrack to the Danny Boyle-directed Steve Jobs – came out on 180g vinyl last month.



Before that, which games hooked you?
In the Amiga era it was probably *Speedball II: Brutal Deluxe*, which is one of my favourite games. I used to play it with a friend of mine, Ben Speed, and I'd beat him all the time. I loved a lot of the stuff the Bitmap Brothers did because I thought they were doing something that felt very cool and very different in the way they presented it. And I also loved arcade games – I used to play a lot of Taito stuff. *Chase HQ* was one of the games I absolutely loved. Every time I go somewhere and there's an arcade, I try to find it. The Amiga version is shit.

"I knew that videogames had got to a level of artistic power when playing the first MGS"

So when did those two worlds coalesce for you, professionally?
I started writing about videogames when I was 13, which when I look back on it now is actually really weird. And I used to run the cheats column in a magazine called GameZone, which was the follow on from Zero. That got me enough money to buy a synthesiser, and that was the overriding factor in gaming music's influence on me as a composer. It was weird because I was composing for TV and games at the same time, but they were two different sides to what I was doing. But doing *The Movies* was pretty important. I went in to see them and they said, "We've made this game and we basically need the last 100 years of film music – can you do that?" And I was like, "Um, yeah?" So I basically had to teach myself incredibly quickly how to mimic 100 years of film music. That was probably important to me as a composer.

Do you still get much time to play?
The problem with everything now is that it's so time-consuming. I find there are loads of games I'll get two-thirds of the way through and then something will happen with the film or project I'm on and I have to leave my routine – of playing that game for a couple of hours every day – for a month or two, and when I come back to it I've forgotten everything. I go, "Oh, shit, I can't remember what to do…" And then I just go and play something else.

Which game has had the greatest impact on you?
I don't think I can answer which is my favourite. But my all-time favourite videogame *experience* was a *Metal Gear Solid* one. I knew that videogames had got to a level of artistic power when playing the first *MGS*, and I rank that as one of my all-time top ten entertainment experiences, alongside seeing Vertigo for the first time. It's that realisation games are a medium that can easily compete with the greatest works of music, the greatest works of cinema and the greatest books on an equal level. I felt, when I played it, videogaming had achieved something new, and that's always been a very powerful moment for me. ■



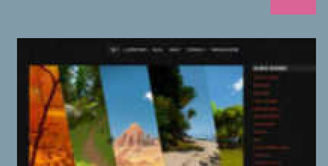
According to a Sony source, Pemberton is responsible for sparking UK interest in *PaRappa The Rapper* after writing articles about the then Japan-only curio

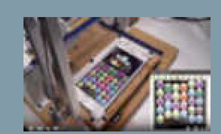
Amelia Pemberton

WEBSITE

Art of Luis
www.bit.ly/thewitnessart

Luis Antonio, an indie developer and one of the key artists on *The Witness*, has shared an in-depth look into the process of creating the game's striking-looking environment and the challenges of working with Jonathan Blow's exacting vision for the game. The blog is ongoing, and at the time of writing Antonio has covered the posters and trailers for the game (including those 'long screenshots'); how the panels, lasers and cables came together; the game's detailed texture work; and several of the earlier areas. All of this is accompanied by a huge number of images that include screenshots of early test builds and the finished areas, and reference shots from field trips. Be warned, though: there's much to be spoiled here if you haven't yet finished the game, so tread carefully.





VIDEO

Puzzle & Dragons robot
www.bit.ly/puzzleanddragonsrobot

YouTuber Junya Sakamoto has built a robot with a terrifying aptitude for setting up combos in *Puzzle & Dragons*. While one video shows the process of designing and building the device, another presents the quick-thinking (though rather noisy) machine obliterating foe after foe. Perhaps the most surprising thing about the footage, however, is the fact that Sakamoto somehow maintained enough concentration to finish the project despite presumably having the game open on his phone throughout.

WEB GAME

Streamline
www.bit.ly/streamlinegame

Now that we've bested all but a handful of *The Witness*'s most inscrutable puzzles, a quick palette cleanser is in order before we polish off the rest. *Streamline* feels like a friendlier, slighter cousin to Jonathan Blow's puzzle epic. Here, you also have to draw a line and reach the exit, but rather than navigate through mazes, you have to find a way to use the sporadic furniture in a sparse grid to reach your goal. Hit a direction key and your line will extend until it hits something, whether that's a solid block, the edge of the play field or your own tail. A series of special squares both help and hinder, some stopping your line from leaving while others arrest you mid-dash to allow a change of direction or cancel everything you've done. It's smart stuff, of which Blow would no doubt approve.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

PLASTIC FANTASTIC

Virtua Fighter figmas
www.bit.ly/virtuafighterfigma

Good Smile Company's latest slug of gaming nostalgia is this set of posable *Virtua Fighter* figures. The designs are based on the original low-poly models from the first game, and feature Akira and Sarah in fetching black outfits and every jarring angle you remember. Both figures come with interchangeable hands to cover the various moves, and you can even swap out their standard expressions for a victory-pose shouting mouth. Clear, articulated stands are also included so you can pose the figures in various mid-combat (and, indeed, mid-air) positions. The figures can be preordered now, while second-player colour versions – and a *Virtua Fighter* arcade machine – will become available at a later date.

continue

Vrcade
Starbreeze AB announces Project StarCade – a new hope?

Open windows
The Internet Archive adds more than 1,000 Windows 3.1 games

Player won
Mario Maker maths, *Dwarf Fortress* arcade… Chat sim in SnapMap?

Cock-a-hoop
More UE4 penis physics experiments, please

quit

Dust to dust
CCP's *EVE*-tied FPS was ambitious, but also not up to its standards

Malprops
But its Malware Museum makes virus-infection tourism a thing

Disconnect
Artist's 48-hour stint in VR results in no ill effects (bar, er, a panic attack)

Flaccid
Soft Engine 2.0's breast fixation feels like a waste

TWEETS

Wanna see the AAA game industry crash? Keep removing, ignoring and gimping singleplayer campaigns.
George Broussard @georgeb3dr
3D Realms and Apogee co-founder

I hear that BILL COSBY INNOCENT !!!!!!!!! was actually just the original name of Kanye's videogame. It was a *Phoenix Wright* clone.
Manveer Heir @manveerheir
Gameplay designer, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*

I may not agree with your Cat Ears mod, but I will defend to the death your right to mod it.
Jake Solomon @SolomonJake
XCOM and *XCOM 2* designer

Wife says I look like a thug walking the placid streets of Highland Park in my black Oculus hoodie.
John Carmack @ID_AA_Carmack
Oculus VR CTO and fashionista

www.twitter.com/edgeonline
Follow **Edge** on Twitter





7
www.pegi.info
PLAY THE GAME, BASED ON THE MOVIE, BASED ON THE GAME!
PlayStation®4 EXCLUSIVE
Download from PlayStation.Store
NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE IN CINEMAS APRIL 29TH
RATCHET & CLANK™
OUT APRIL 22ND
PS4™

DISPATCHES APRIL



Issue 290

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a New Nintendo 3DS XL, supplied by the Nintendo UK store



Lost myself

Virtual reality concerns me. Yes, it's technologically amazing. And of course it's going to be immersive and create incredible atmosphere in our games. But I'm genuinely worried about the social implications were it to become the standard for games. I worry that with not just an immersive world on a TV but one literally enclosing your head from the outside world, gamers are putting barriers up with others.

I enjoy playing through games (even singleplayer titles) with my girlfriend, with both of us helping to solve puzzles and enjoying the story. And I adore local competitive multiplayer – the brilliant intensity that comes from a close match of *Street Fighter* with a friend over some beer and a good laugh together. Virtual reality will be two folk with chunky eyeglasses sitting on the couch not even able to hear each other, losing track of time and probably basic eating requirements due to the sensory deprivation effects. Even playing a game with someone else in VR looks likely to be a case of stylised avatars, so you can no longer even see what your friend looks like.

> "Virtual reality will be two folk sitting on the couch not even able to hear each other"

Not to mention the impact this will have on the way gaming is viewed by everyone else, just as games start to get recognised by the mainstream as film-rivalling entertainment. You only have to look at the unfortunately hilarious image of Palmer Luckey on the front of Time Magazine to get an idea of how this looks to the outside world. It's not that the tech isn't going to be great fun to use, I'm just worried about the way it could change us, not only as gamers, but as people as well.
Mark Blain

It's only a slight twist on the average *WOW* player's experience, isn't it? In seriousness, it surely won't be long before the image of a person wearing a VR headset sheds its dorkiness. And many VR initiatives seem more concerned with connecting users across large distances than it does isolating them from their immediate surroundings. We'll be looking deeper into VR next issue.

Happy again

I'm looking forward to *Vane* – it may be just the aesthetic experience I'm seeking at the moment. Let me explain.

Convalescing in the country recently, I was looking for a gaming moment to complement gentle walks and early snowdrops after a busy, gaming-free year. My first thought was to reinstall *Civilization V*, and a few long nights of 4Xing captured the melancholy, deliberate mood of getting well slowly. In its way this is a perfect game, but it wasn't exactly the moment I was inching towards.

So I looked elsewhere, and briefly toyed with the desolation of *Fallout*. But then the ideal moment came, one evening, in the middle of nowhere in *Elite Dangerous*.

I was dipping in and out of planetary rings for no good reason, far from civilisation, lacking money and purpose, expecting very little of my career as an explorer. And suddenly, somewhere in the aimlessness of this unpressured wandering, was the essence of a line of Leonard Cohen at his most contemplative. This cultish, good-but-not-transcendent space game had brought Famous Blue Raincoat to the far Welsh Marches.

All art forms promise these perfect moments when the stars align and bring mood, experience and circumstance together. There won't be snowdrops out when *Vane* is released, I imagine, but from what I gather the game is a good bet for similarly evocative moments in 2016. And I'll take those over the upcoming *Doom* reboot any day.
Neil Rutter



www.facebook.com/ edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

Let's make this letter some kind of record of that moment. There's nothing wrong with losing yourself in the artful dismemberment of demons, but it seems like you might prefer the pace of a spot of fishing in *Animal Crossing* for your new 3DS.

On & on

Piracy is as old as time, but the recent revelations from Chinese cracking group 3DM that Denuvo's anti-piracy measures might eventually prove unhackable definitely raises some interesting questions.

The 'lost sales' theory has been proposed by many of piracy's opponents as a factor in preventing hard-working developers from getting fairly rewarded. Digital Rights Management is a relatively recent phenomenon that has resulted in proprietary systems failing, caused knock-on effects with performance and memory usage, and arguably prevented legitimate customers from fully enjoying games they've paid for.

If the virtual elimination of game piracy is achieved, then the potential consequences are fascinating. Will sales increase to replace those 'lost' through piracy? Will the games industry be harmed by reduced freedom and therefore exposure?

The effects of this will no doubt permeate throughout the game industry, primarily on the PC, but are also likely to affect consoles and possibly all other forms digital media.

I just hope it doesn't discourage DRM-free merchants, and that there's still a place for games with and without DRM, with consumer choice hopefully being the positive eventual outcome.
Ahmed Wobi

Will any technology, no matter how advanced, ever put an end to piracy? Indeed, the suggestion that such a development might come to pass pushed 3DM leader Bird Sister (not her real name, we're willing to wager) to announce that the group's members have renewed efforts to crack Denuvo's technology, the scamps.

Far

I'm currently finalising plans to move abroad, and as part of a concerted effort to shed some of the flab of life's possessions (and force myself outdoors into my new environs), I have sold my Wii U and PlayStation 4. For the first time in 25 years I won't have a games console in my flat, though an overseas **Edge** subscription is still on the shopping list – I'm not going completely cold turkey.

I don't see getting rid of my consoles as some dramatic or worthy achievement, as it was done largely for practical reasons. However, I felt a palpable sense of relief when the consoles were out of my grasp, and it got me to thinking about the role that games play in my life.

These days, with work and general existence to deal with, gaming is a hobby to fit in whenever I can and tends to be limited in terms of time. When I spot a window, it becomes my focus, and any impediment to my gaming at the expected time is an irritation. On top of this, I become over-invested in the hype of upcoming or newly released games and inevitably have an insurmountable backlog. Any game which lacks a palpable sense of progression towards a conclusion, even if enjoyable, therefore becomes a stumbling block on the way to the next game. In short, I have realised that gaming has become a bit too much of a grind rather than a genuinely fun pastime. I have absolutely no idea how this happened.

I am now back to square one. I finished *Bloodborne* and sold the rest of the backlog, and it feels extremely liberating. At some point in 2016 I will jump back on the bandwagon, and who knows what it will entail – perhaps PlayStation VR, or NX? Maybe *The Last Guardian*, or *Zelda*?

My plan is to return to the days when I carefully considered each purchase, owned and played one game at a time, and appreciated each experience to the full without distraction.

To anyone else who has got lost in the general chaos of the modern games industry hype train, I urge you to give it a go. *Dark Souls III* will probably just wreck everything and expose my weakness, but where's the harm in trying?
Iain Critien

Let's burn it all! Crack out the Snakes & Ladders! Move into a hole in the ground! Well, at least until *The Last Guardian* finally emerges from its hibernation, as you say.

She said

I've only just gotten around to playing *Her Story*. Late as I am to the party, the experience was revelatory. I've always had a soft spot for *LA Noire*, despite its broken facial expressions and hand-holding yellow evidence markers, and I really enjoyed *The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter*, too – at least until they gave up on making puzzles and just lined up all the clues for the later murders.

Both of those games scratched an itch within me to really interrogate – in every sense – game worlds. But my awareness of the artifice with which their mysteries were constructed was always a nagging presence at the back of my mind, and one that subtly undermined my enjoyment. They felt like frustratingly clipped glimpses into a future where worlds are truly interactive and responsive, adapting to the player's presence in ways that aren't just a change of script.

Now, I know *Her Story* is far from the arrival of that future, but within the narrower definition of a truly interrogable world, it feels like a huge bound towards it. Being given free rein to ask whatever I wanted, and follow any line of enquiry that I came up with, was liberating in a way I've never experienced before. And I can't wait for this courageous, and generous, approach to game design to become more widespread.
James Harper

Well, Sam Barlow's hard at work on his next project, and presumably it'll retain many of *Her Story*'s unique qualities. For now, how about giving *The Witness* a whirl? ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

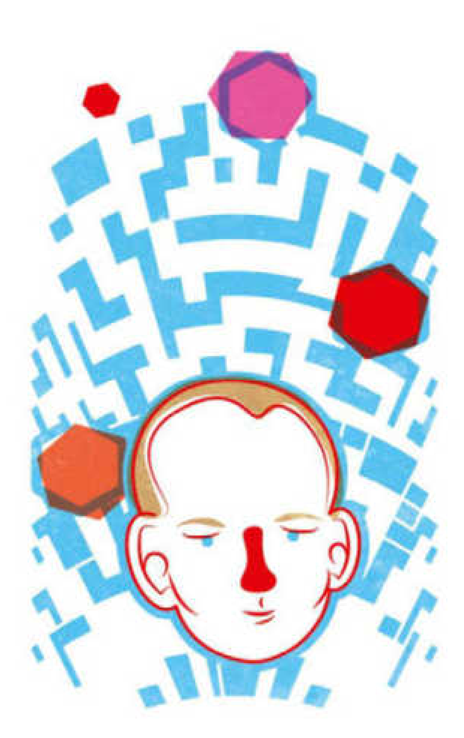
What is a puzzle? The etymology of the word itself is puzzling. The Oxford English Dictionary suggests possible derivations from earlier European words about being bewildered when trying to choose. And in English, the state of being puzzled is, from the late 16th century, that of being confused or at a loss. This is how videogames often try to make us feel, hopefully in a pleasurable way. And they do this by being filled with puzzles.

Yet a puzzle, in modern English, has the sense of something rather trivial. It's something that's both difficult and pointless. A puzzle isn't as serious as a 'problem', something a serious intellectual might worthily attack. Ludwig Wittgenstein reputedly said there were no real problems in philosophy, only puzzles. And in the language of chess books there's an evident hierarchy of seriousness from chess puzzles (which are for juniors or beginners), to problems (for the seasoned player), to studies (the most elegant and artistic problems).

But in games, we don't talk of problems or studies; only puzzles. And this little word is used for a bewildering variety of ways the game might challenge the player. You might have to work out how a giant, eldritch machine spread through several rooms is supposed to work. Or you might have to find the right keycard to open a door. Perhaps you'll have to roll a heavy ball through a booby-trapped maze, or just slide some virtual tiles around to complete an image. A puzzle can be a grand challenge of many interlocking deductions and physical actions, or it can be a connect-the-pipes minigame.

Connect-the-pipes minigames, as it happens, are the basis for the hundreds of puzzles in Jonathan Blow's *The Witness*. And this extraordinary game, with its lovely echoing cabins, surreally hypersaturated island flora, and its glorious buildings and structures, is not just a game filled with puzzles. It's about solving puzzles, and also about learning and teaching. It concentrates

Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**



> How pleasant to play a game with no lengthy backtracking, no unskippable FMV, no repetitive grinding

on one of the most apparently trivial and familiar kinds of videogame puzzle and expands its possibilities relentlessly, to an almost hallucinogenic degree.

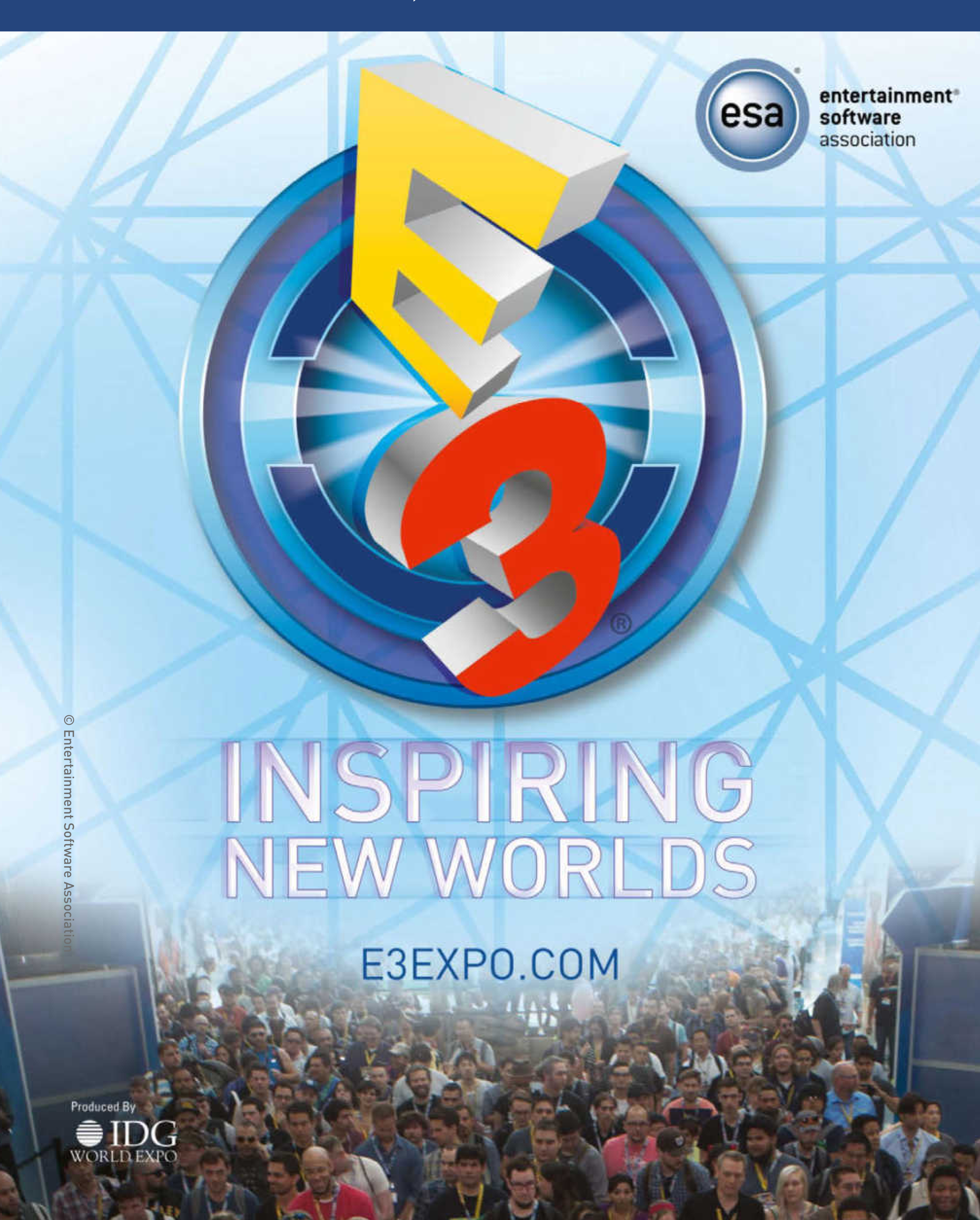
The game teaches the player, wordlessly and quite brilliantly, how to play it. As the simple maze puzzles at the beginning ramify relentlessly with new twists, the fanatically systematic way in which this is done reminds me of nothing so much as the procedures of learning a musical instrument, or of developing a musical theme in composition. When you're learning to play the piano, you first begin playing scales with both hands in parallel. Later, you're introduced to 'contrary motion', in which the left hand goes down the keyboard while the right hand simultaneously goes up the keyboard, before they reverse direction and meet again in the middle. It is freakily difficult at first. And so is the moment when Blow introduces contrary motion to his puzzles, with two paths snaking around the maze in opposite directions at once. Other variations are introduced by manipulations through mirror inversion or rotational symmetry, just as with the serialist technique of generating new tone rows in modernist composition.

Each set of puzzles is also a tiny parable of the learning process. When a novel rule is introduced – either within the puzzle, or somehow outside it – you're urged through the same micro-narrative of hypothesis-testing, failure, and the eventual tremendous satisfaction of the "Aha!" moment. Challenged, monstrously yet benignly, you end up challenging yourself anyway. Sure, you can often stumble through a puzzle by trial and error. But the pleasure is far greater when you've stared it down and constructed the correct solution in your head first.

The Witness is brilliant and mesmerising, and oddly mentally refreshing. How pleasant to play a game with no lengthy backtracking, no unskippable FMV, no repetitive grinding. But it's fair to ask what it all adds up to. Yes, one may admire its disdain for superficial originality, combined with its deep originality in the almost philosophical devotion to exploring the ramifications of pathfinding challenges. But in music, or in writing, or whatever difficult thing you like to do away from the console, there are endless puzzles every day in the service of something greater. Is *The Witness* anything more than a kind of giant animated compendium of sudoko puzzles? What does it all mean? It's in provoking that question, perhaps, that its cunning artistry lies.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

JUNE 14-16, 2016 | LOS ANGELES





NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

My deadline for this column means that, by the time you read this, the apparently centuries-long process through which the United States selects its candidates for the presidency will be several weeks closer to finishing. A would-be POTUS spends almost as long running for the Oval Office as they will sitting in it, and, watched from afar, it's a tortuous process. You're invested in the result because it will doubtless impact your life in some way, but not so invested you don't spend the best part of 18 months rolling your eyes in front of the news, wondering when it will all be over.

As I write this the Iowa primary is just coming to a close. After months of shouting, pointing and slandering each other's characters, voting records and mothers, the wrestlers have finally stepped into the ring. The presidential race is still a long, long way from being over, but at least it's started. It's going to be boring. It's going to be infuriating. It's going to feel like it'll last for ever. Yet it's absolutely irresistible.

I'm struck by the way the USA has managed to turn something really quite tedious – the process of deciding which stuffed shirt gets to complain about Congress, sign off on drone strikes, and do nothing about gun crime – into a year-long game. It's a season, a tournament, with preliminaries and knockout rounds and a grand final with 'super' in the title. Candidates compete in a race to the Whitehouse. The language used by players, pundits and passers-by alike isn't that of the political establishment, but of the sporting class.

Peppering the post-match coverage of the Iowa primary were countless references to Ted Cruz's 'ground game' – a political idiom borrowed from gridiron, and more recently MMA, but which I will always associate with fighting games. I heard a colleague praise the way *Street Fighter V* is "all about the ground game", rather than emulating the tricky complexity of its predecessor. The ground game is about the fundamentals: running with the ball, engaging with the electorate at street level, or just being really good with Chun-Li's standing fierce punch. There's pride, and praise, to be had in being brilliant at the basics.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

I'm struck by the way the USA has managed to turn something really quite tedious into a year-long game

Another essential skill for an aspiring leader of the free world is self-aggrandising bluster, something we're starting to see more of in fighting games now that the competitive scene is growing in popularity. As production values ramp up, a generation of top-level players raised on WWF Raw half-jokingly big themselves up in interviews and flex for the intro-video cameras. The fists and feet start to fly and commentators assess the candidates' – sorry, the players' – form, their momentum, their mental condition; the things that affect success beyond pure ability. Politics and videogames: two distant, disparate things that fancy themselves as sports. It's easy enough to see why. Both crave legitimacy on a wider scale, the political athlete seeking power, the eSportsperson after wealth and acclaim, each knowing that excellence is worthless if nobody's paying attention.

As you've probably worked out by now, I think about fighting games a lot. I like finding comparisons between fighting games and real-life things even more. Obviously one can over-think these things, draw comparisons where none exist and later end up regretting it. So to save myself from writing myself into a dead-end of wank-hattery, I thought I'd bring this month's musings to a close by asking: if presidential candidates were *Street Fighter* characters, which ones would they be? It's the sort of hard-hitting, insightful reportage on which this esteemed publication made its name.

Bernie Sanders is Dhalsim. He's been around forever and always had his fans, but his unconventional tactics meant he went virtually ignored by the mainstream for years, until he had grown too powerful to ignore. With his strong ground game, Ted Cruz is the Ryu of the piece, the safe, slightly obvious pick for those afraid of change. Hillary Clinton is… I dunno, Chun-Li? I never said this process was perfect.

It is, however, for Donald Trump. With his ludicrous shock of blond hair and needlessly flamboyant style, he's quite obviously Ken Masters. Both present themselves as unpredictable, dangerous, stylish alternatives to the status quo. In truth, both will be figured out rather quickly, when people realise that they're just like the other guy, except now a load of stuff's on fire.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s deputy editor. After 20 years playing Ken, he's in SFV's training mode, trying to learn Dhalsim*

SUBSCRIBE TO

EDGE

Get the best possible value with our complete print and digital bundle

CHOOSE YOUR PACKAGE

PRINT



Every issue delivered to your door, with exclusive covers only available to subscribers

ONLY £54 per year

DIGITAL



Instant digital access on your iOS and Android device, with exclusive animated covers on iPad

ONLY £27 per year

#291

HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Talking 'bout my generation

For all his flaws, popular American song-and-dance man Michael Jackson was on the nose when he said, "All of us are products of our childhood". Whether consciously or not, we are all in thrall to our pasts. Early hip-hop producers sampled funk tracks; late-'90s house-music knob-twiddlers plundered their parents' disco collections. So it's only natural that modern-day game-makers should look to their childhood loves for inspiration, be that *Broforce*'s homage to '80s action cinema, *Gone Home*'s love letter to analogue tape, or the way Hidetaka Miyazaki's youthful adoration of Bram Stoker's Dracula permeates *Bloodborne*.

Nostalgia ain't what it used to be, but it's still a powerful thing, and a potentially lucrative one; gaming may be a broad church, but we are all of a certain age, sharing pop-cultural touchstones. So when Foam Sword tells us that its hand-painted adventure *Knights & Bikes* (p44) is inspired by The Goonies, our ears prick up. When Platinum reveals that the next chapter in its ongoing anthology of licensed *Bayonetta* reskins is *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutants In Manhattan* (p54), the entire office starts humming the theme tune from a 25-year-old cartoon. And as soon as we lay eyes on *Unbox* (p52), we remember N64 splitscreen and blue-sky 3D platformers and start hunting around for three more controllers.

By contrast, Epic Games' *Paragon* (p40) is inspired by the achingly contemporary MOBA. Yet what Epic shares with this month's Hype nostalgists is an honest acknowledgement of its influences, a refreshing stance given other studios' puzzling attempts to distance MOBA-inspired games from the label itself. There's honesty, too, in *Quantum Break* (p34), which after all that fuss about its live-action component, turns out to be a very Remedy game at heart, a shooter from a studio that loves and excels at them. The next generation of young designers will have plenty to call on.

MOST WANTED

Hitman PC, PS4, Xbox One
The shift to episodic releases makes sense for Squenix post-*Life Is Strange*, but will also mean Io can change things around based on player feedback. After *Absolution*, that's no bad thing, though if the February beta's any indication, the studio's off to a solid start.

Untitled Her Story successor TBA
Sam Barlow has teased a pixelated synopsis for a spiritual successor to the **Edge**-Award-winning *Her Story*. Barlow stresses that there's no story connection, but that it will be built around *FMV* and "more of what people liked about the first one." Sounds just fine to us.

Watch Dogs 2 TBA
With nothing known beyond confirmation of its existence and planned release by March 2017, we're safe in our optimism that this will more closely deliver on the promise of its predecessor. While we're looking on the positive side, we'll take less of the usual map clutter, please.





Killing enemies in a Stutter leaves them hanging in time, turning them into suspended ragdolls. Enterprising players can even use them as makeshift cover

HYPE

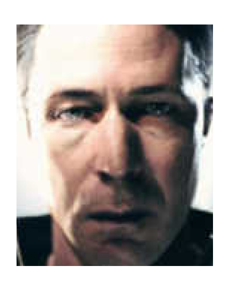
QUANTUM BREAK

Looking to the future, holding on to the past

Developer Remedy Entertainment
Publisher Microsoft
Format PC, Xbox One
Origin Finland
Release April 5

ABOVE **The game opens with Jack Joyce visiting erstwhile best friend Paul Serene at his laboratory on a university campus. When a time-travel accident occurs and the sinister Monarch corporation invades, it makes a fine battlefield.** RIGHT **Strikers are the first of a series of enemies that we're promised will re-use or subvert Jack Joyce's powers, forcing you to analyse not only what your powers offer you, but what they might offer others, too**





Divergence point

Junction sequences are the game's most unusual gameplay moments, a necessary bridge between the core game and its four live-action interludes, as well as your only real moments of control over the storyline. Taking control of antagonist Paul Serene, you're given a small area to explore and encouraged to interact with as much of the environment as possible. Once you're ready to move on, you're asked to make a decision – in the case of Act One, it's how brutally or deviously Serene's Monarch corporation will react to Jack Joyce's interference. In an unexpected parallel to Dontnod's *Life Is Strange*, each possible decision is preceded by a 'Glimpse', a stream of clips designed to show you a snapshot of what effect your action will have on the continuing story.

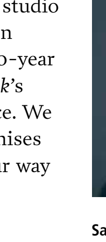
The problem with shifting a paradigm is that it can be hard for people to get a handle on what you might be shifting it *to*. Since its announcement in 2013, *Quantum Break* has existed as an intangible promise of reinvention, a bold mix of popular culture's currently most vital and effervescent forms – the longtail, uncompromising storytelling of television crushed between the seams of gaming's ability for moment-to-moment malleability. All very exciting, of course, but it begged the question: what would (or could) *Quantum Break* actually be in practice?

In playing through the first act of the game it soon becomes apparent that this attempt at audiovisual alchemy has resulted in something that could quite comfortably be described as an action-adventure hybrid with some very long FMV cutscenes. Each act is solidly, verging on stolidly, built – three parts action gameplay, one part 20-minute live-action episode and, connecting the two, a Junction section (see 'Divergence point'), in which you make decisions on behalf of the game's antagonists that will go on to affect the narrative of both sides of the experience. It's certainly lovingly constructed, stylish and seamless (with the prerequisite that your broadband keeps up with the streamed TV sections), but, crucially, it feels like Remedy's chosen media haven't meshed, but rather been jammed into sequence. Even if the packaging is fresh, the products inside are nothing we haven't seen before.

The game quickly begins to throw ten or more opponents at you simultaneously

Not that that's necessarily a problem, nor even the point. "It is a big, explosive, triple-A, cinematic story-driven action game, first and foremost," creative director **Sam Lake** explains. "The show is there, it's a really important part, but at the end of the day I do think that it's a *feature* of this experience. Ultimately, *Quantum Break* is a game."

While much has been made of the game's peculiar form, that's perhaps been to the detriment of what feels like Remedy's best work with *Quantum Break*. The Finnish studio has almost exclusively made thirdperson shooters of various stripes during its 20-year lifespan, and the game at *Quantum Break*'s core is testament to that vast experience. We may be disappointed to find those promises of reinvention fall short, but making our way there is a joy. On the evidence of our hands-on time, this is Remedy's most primally satisfying shooter to date.



Sam Lake, creative director at Remedy

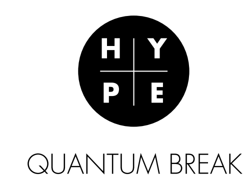
"*Alan Wake* certainly has a special place in my heart," Lake says, "but part of the criticism that it got was that the action side of it, the combat side, got repetitive quite fast. So part of [developing *Quantum Break*] was to make sure we put a big effort into action, into different powers that the player gets, into different enemy classes. So there's depth. You go through the game and there's always new stuff coming at you. It keeps evolving."

This focus is clear from the outset. By the end of Act One, protagonist Jack Joyce already has four-fifths of his time-altering combat abilities – granted by a blast of Chronon energy from the experimental time machine that acts as the springboard for this soft-sci-fi superhero origin story. The player already has a comprehensive grounding in the frenetic cover combat that makes up the majority of their interactions with the game. It's gratifyingly quick to get to the point, and even faster to start throwing genuine challenges at the player, forcing them to adapt.

Joyce can more than hold his own against a couple of enemies, using the kind of dynamic cover familiar to players of Crystal Dynamics' recent *Tomb Raider* games to protect himself and outflank them. But the game quickly begins to throw ten or more opponents at you simultaneously and cranks up the AI's aggression, requiring you to deal with grenade blasts and close-quarters assaults. It's a bombardment that demands the kind of tactics that proved effective in *Max Payne*, but where the 2001 game used time manipulation for room-clearance theatrics, *Quantum Break* more often asks you to use your powers to control a fight, rather than dominate it.

Time Vision marks enemies and interactive elements, letting you take stock of a situation. Time Shield turns incoming ▶







missiles into gently glowing, always inaccurate tracer lines around you. Time Dodge sees Joyce thundercrack his way several metres across empty ground, ending with either a devastating melee attack or, borrowing from *Bayonetta*, a short burst of chewy slow-motion to take out nearby threats at leisure. Best of all is Time Stop, which freezes a targeted bubble of space. This lets you put a particular threat on hold, stop incoming fire as you escape, create time-delayed traps by freezing and firing on scattered gas canisters, or empty whole clips towards frozen enemies, which resolve like enormous shotgun blasts when the bubble collapses.

Knowing how and when to use these powers becomes as important to surviving combat as discharging your weapon, but Remedy promises that this is far from the extent of the game's demands. Once you're comfortable with your powers, the designers begin to find ways to undermine you. At the opening of Act Two, the game introduces Striker enemies who can Time Dash like Joyce, forcing you to abandon cover altogether and play the game at a constant sprint. Remedy also talks about power-sapping grenades, enemies who can't be Time Stopped, and more. If the pace keeps up, it promises to make the violent journey through the game's five acts a changeable and fascinating action experience.

While we've seen only brief demonstrations so far, the game's Stutter set-pieces are intended to offer another facet of play. Stutters are moments in which time has "broken down", leaving the majority of the world frozen, with certain elements resolving like three-dimensional GIF animations, endlessly looping through an action – a ship collapsing and rebuilding itself, for example. They're used both as dangerous combat spaces (barrels and interactive level elements can be destroyed) and for a measure of puzzle-platforming. By way of an introduction to the idea, our hands-on demo features a stack of crates that have to be raced across before they're crushed, but it's not hard to imagine more taxing concepts being scattered throughout as shootout interludes.

Lake calls *Quantum Break* the "ultimate Remedy game", and it seems like a fair label. The studio's preoccupation with the satisfying thud of a pistol slide, with turning visual film conventions into interactive game mechanics, and with uncanny digital recreations of actors' faces (this game's mesmerising, painstaking animations can be traced directly back to Lake's own frozen gurn in *Max Payne*) are all at their most ambitious and well-practised even in this early section. Equally, there's also evidence of Remedy's recurring problems with rote, featureless out-of-combat gameplay, and dialogue that sits somewhere between homage and accidental parody – memorably, an attempt to explain the fractured chronology by way of a food simile leads to Dominic Monaghan's character shouting, "The time egg is fucked!"

Among all of this familiarity, the TV show sections do stand out, although not for the right reasons – outsourced LA studio Lightbulb Productions has made something more befitting of Syfy than HBO. Act One's episode is equal parts glossy and empty, an attempt to instil believable humanity in the supporting characters while not losing the pace of the preceding gameplay that manages neither feat. That the CGI effects look distinctly worse than the gameplay sections' own versions is the greatest indictment.

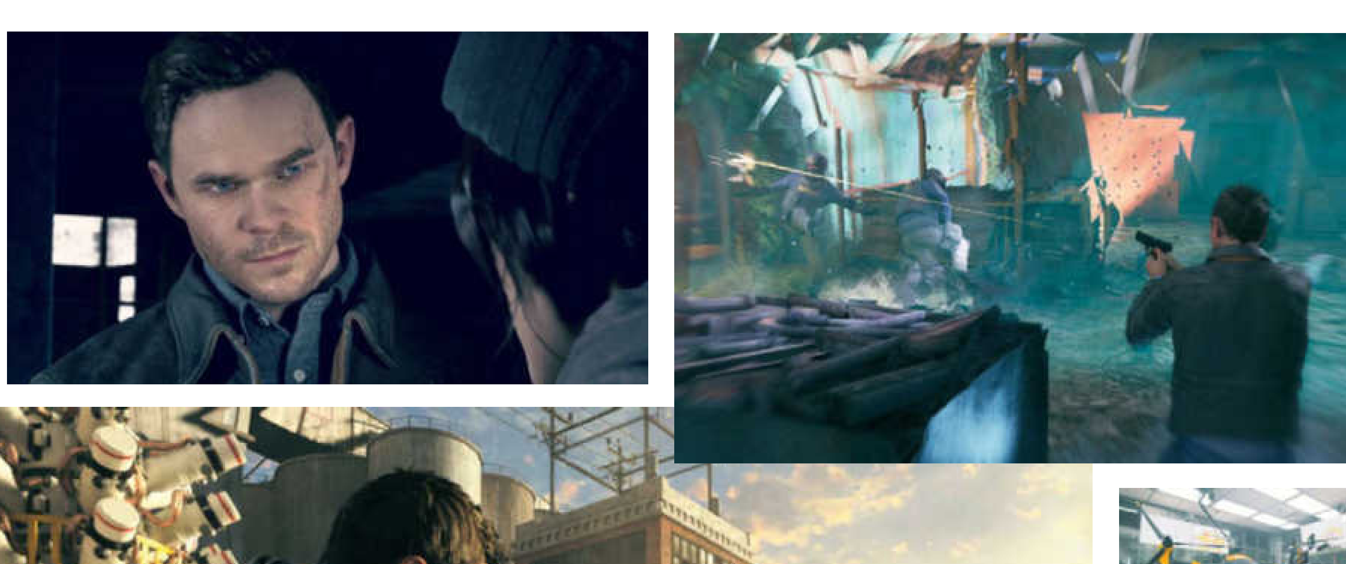
As for the show's ability to reflect your actions, that's revealed to be something of a smokescreen. While the Act One Junction choice does swap out whole scenes of the first episode (indicating that this is a branching moment with a popup icon in the corner of the screen), that amounts to, at most, around a quarter of the running time, while the endpoint is practically identical.

Quantum Break's attempt to change our expectations of games, and indeed entertainment overall, comes up a little short; it's unlikely that this project will turn out to be the successful media-meld that Remedy once envisaged. But it's certainly a fascinating experiment, and by no means a failure outright. That fantastic core combat sticks in the memory, serving as a continual reminder of the team's considerable talent and experience. Despite some rough edges, this might well be the game that fans of the studio wanted Remedy to make all along. ■



Face time

Remedy's DIY approach to development is admirable, and it's never clearer than in *Quantum Break*'s facial tech. Primarily using a homebrewed capture station – built out of, among other things, tens of off-the-shelf DSLRs, a bank of unused Xbox One alpha kits and the heatsink from a PS3 – the studio's created a collection of remarkably convincing digital actors. In order to demonstrate just how effectively Remedy has captured the human face, even outside of speech, an animator accidentally invokes the spirit of *Super Mario 64* by loading up X-Men and Jack Joyce actor Shawn Ashmore's disembodied head onto his monitor as he speaks to us, leaving it to glance around the room and gawp wordlessly. It's incredibly unnerving.









TOP **While a few glitches rear their heads in the preview version, *Quantum Break*'s facial capture is a clear triumph, investing even in-gameplay conversations with a curious realism.**
MAIN **Time Stop looks fantastic in motion, crackling and diffusing the fiery light of tracers as you pump it with bullets. It's useful, too: the bubble turning red is a reasonably accurate signifier that your target will take lethal damage.**
RIGHT **As fights become more hectic, melee attacks become more necessary – both Shield and Dash can be used as the means to unsteady or kill a target, while still making use of their more obvious benefits**

TOP **Jack's traditional arsenal is unremarkable, seemingly kept simple to allow for readability when used in conjunction with his powers. The Xbox One controller's impulse triggers at least offer an extra jolt to using his scavenged weapons.**
ABOVE CENTRE **Barring its sci-fi setup, *Quantum Break*'s world is a mostly realistic one – Monarch's equipment is a mixture of modern military and applied science. And then the time-travelling commandos appear.**
ABOVE **The one power we haven't experienced first-hand is Time Rush, which seems to be an extension of the Dash mechanic, allowing you to cross rooms in the blink of an AI enemy's eye**



PARAGON

Epic Games expands the MOBA template into a new dimension

Developer/publisher Epic Games
Format PC, PS4
Origin US
Release 2016

Epic is keen to stress that *Paragon* is a MOBA. This is a contested, storied term, one that describes some of the world's biggest games and a few of its bigger failures, too. MOBAs were the new MMOGs, and the demise of projects such as EA's *Dawngate* and Warner's *Infinite Crisis* reflect the difficulty that a succession of large studios have faced in trying to climb onto the bandwagon.

Epic emphasises that *Paragon* is a MOBA not to associate it with that rough spot in the industry's recent history but to differentiate it from a modern trend towards character-based first- and thirdperson team shooters – a charge led by Blizzard's *Overwatch* and reinforced by Gearbox's *Battleborn* and Hi-Rez Studios' *Paladins*. With its over-the-shoulder camera, Unreal Engine-powered sci-fi look and gun-toting heroes, *Paragon* very much appears to be this latter type of game. Insisting that it *isn't* comes across, at first, as a marketing ploy, as if Epic is trying to position itself outside of the rat race. Playing *Paragon* for the first time, however, something becomes immediately very clear: *Paragon* actually *is* a MOBA. Peel back the guns and the gloss and you reveal a love letter to *League Of Legends* and *Dota 2*.

Paragon will be available for both PC and PS4, and – perhaps surprisingly – will offer crossplatform play between the two. "We constrained ourselves from the beginning to work on a controller, and to hero and world design that render at 60fps on a console," **Steve Superville**, *Paragon*'s creative director, tells us. Rather than see this as a case of porting a PC game to new territory, Superville argues that MOBAs are inherently suited to consoles. "We believed that the pacing and positioning of MOBAs works better on a console than needing everything to be twitch-based," he says. "On PC, mouse and keyboard is dominant because you need to swing your crosshair onto a pixel as fast as you can. But the 'time to live' of MOBAs just naturally aligns with play on a controller."

This notion that MOBAs have been waiting to work on console, rather than assuming that they must be forced to fit, is appealing. It's backed up by the feeling that, when you get used to the controller-appropriate control scheme and action-game aesthetic, moment-to-moment play in *Paragon* is very close to the genre's roots.

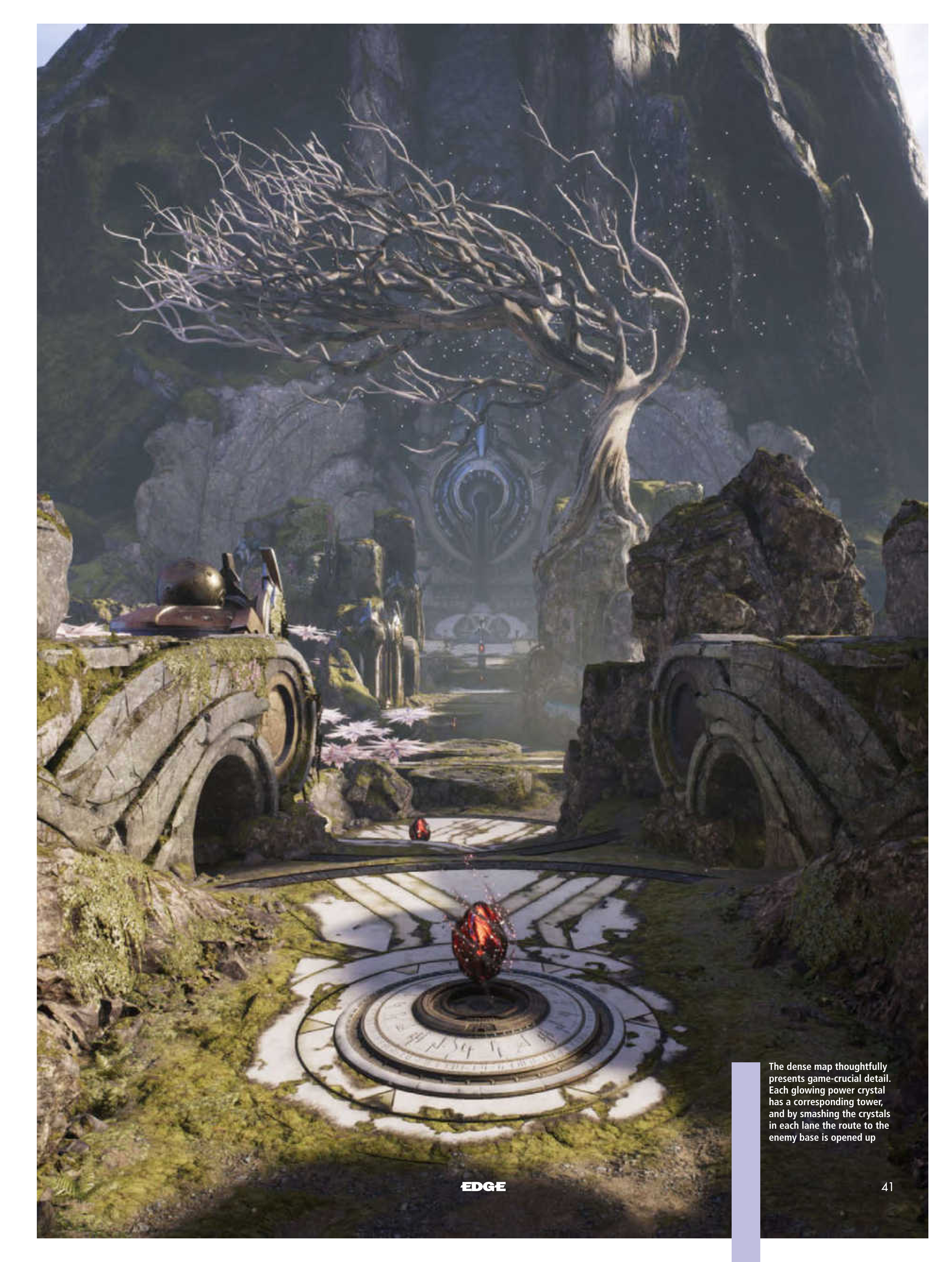
Two teams of five players face off on a map with three lanes, along which armies of computer-controlled robots vie for advantage. As you get closer to either team's base you encounter defensive towers that have to be destroyed. Between each lane is a neutral zone that offers powerups and resource benefits ▶



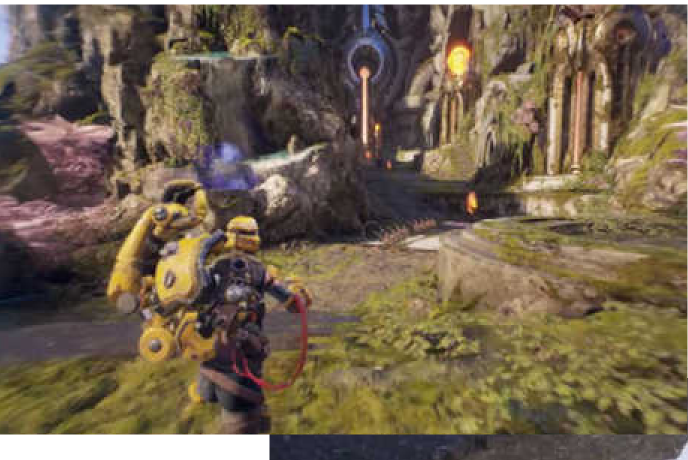
Steve Superville, creative director of *Paragon*

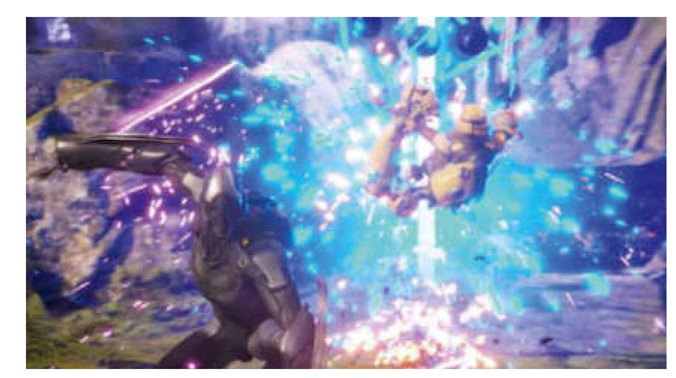


There's a touch of Katniss Everdeen to the visual design of Sparrow

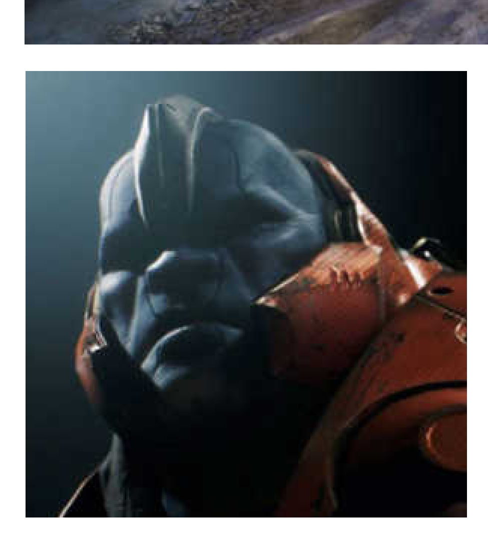


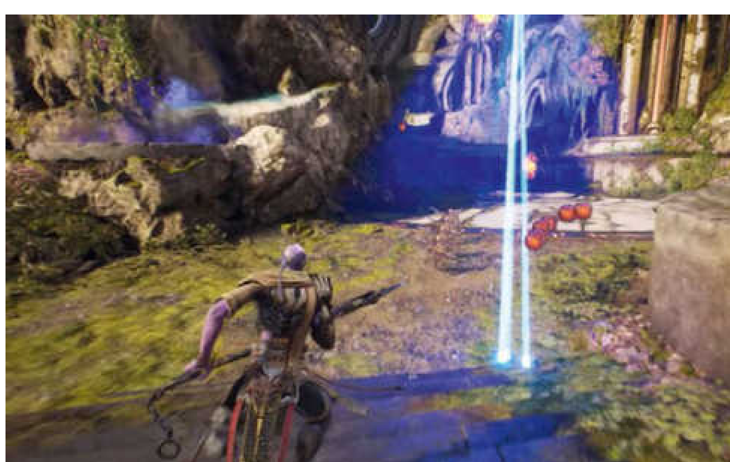
The dense map thoughtfully presents game-crucial detail. Each glowing power crystal has a corresponding tower, and by smashing the crystals in each lane the route to the enemy base is opened up

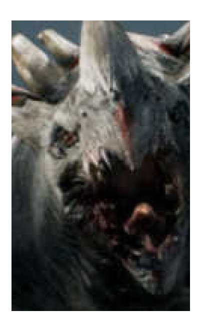




ABOVE **Gadget has an array of controlling and damaging abilities that make her a dangerous presence in the mid-stage of a match. An ambush from the jungle can quickly upset the equilibrium of a lane.**
TOP RIGHT **Quickly clearing groups of AI minions with abilities puts pressure on your opponent, ultimately forcing them to fight under their own defensive towers and making it a lot harder for them to respond to problems elsewhere.**
MAIN **The jungle is home to neutral monsters that grant power-boosting buffs when slain, so raiding the jungle makes for a natural precursor to a teamfight or push, but teams (and their bases) are vulnerable while this is happening.**
BELOW **Steel is a durable support, with an array of abilities that protect him and his allies. Simply being large is part of this: in a game with manual aiming, having to shoot past a big, imposing character is a challenge in itself.**
BELOW RIGHT **Hoovering up resources from the fallen adds an active element to levelling up. You're encouraged to take risks with your positioning to collect everything, particularly after a bloody teamfight**







Grux is a powerful roamer, specialising in emerging suddenly from the jungle to lay waste to isolated opponents. Visually, he comes from the same school of design as *Gears Of War*'s Locust

for the team that's able to lay claim to it, and victory is a matter of coordinating a multi-pronged, asymmetrical campaign across three fronts that translates into a territorial advantage and, in turn, the ability to lay siege to the enemy base and win the game.

Paragon includes all of these familiar ideas, but each of them has been recalibrated to work in three dimensions. The setting is a futuristic but ruined temple complex, covered with vegetation and set into a mountainside. Unlike any other game of this type, the lanes are on an incline. In *Dota* or *LOL* you might talk about 'top', 'middle', or 'bottom' lane due to their position on the isometric map: here the same terminology is appropriate due to their physical position relative to one another. Top lane, off to one side, is the highest point on the map. The mountainside curves down from there towards mid, and then there's a sharp drop-off towards bottom lane.

This is a major point of difference between *Paragon* and Hi-Rez's *Smite*, the game it's closest to: the latter is played in thirdperson but for the most part takes place on a 2D plane. *Paragon*'s topological variety allows it to do away with RTS-style fog of war, necessary in *Smite*, because lines of sight are naturally obscured by the environment. You can see clearly from top lane down to mid and bottom, if you look, but you're just as likely to miss the assassin sneaking up on you because of a rocky outcrop or a ridgeline.

Paragon's jungle takes the form of a pair of sunken valleys between raised lines, separated physically by staircases and visibly by a tree canopy – you can't see what's happening down there at all unless you place wards, and shaking an enemy pursuit in this winding, disorienting area feels surprisingly like it does in more traditional games of this type.

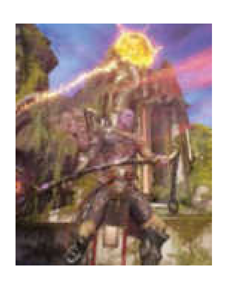
Each lane's 'towers' take the form of a paired crystal and an arcane cannon set into a nearby part of the environment. The crystal is the thing you destroy, but you're always aware of fire coming from above you. Raised areas around key chokepoints offer the opportunity for a defending team to (literally) get the drop on their opponents, and failing to keep track of who is where for a moment can be fatal: a little like failing to keep an eye on the minimap in a traditional MOBA, but rooted in environmental design rather than the UI.

Within this new context, *Paragon*'s current character roster is relatively traditional. Gunslinger Twinblast offers an easy way in for shooter players, fulfilling the carry role with high damage output that scales as the match progresses. Gideon represents *Paragon*'s take on the MOBA mid-laner: a high-DPS mage with built-in teleport and a high-impact Ultimate. The experience he gains in a solo lane translates into teamfight-turning power around the map. His detailed character model and the flashy visual effects that surround his moveset rest on top of a design that has a lot of *Dota* in its DNA – even his Ultimate, Black Hole, shares its name and theme with one of that game's most famous abilities.

Paragon's characters come into their own when their abilities interact with the environment. Support caster Dekker has a stun in the form of a projectile ball of energy that can be bounced off walls to catch targets unaware, and frontliner Steel can shove enemies with a charge attack: towards his team, away from his team, or even off a cliff and into the jungle as the situation (or accident) dictates.

These are familiar ideas, but they have been recalibrated to work in three dimensions

As characters level up they earn Card Points, which are spent on unlocking upgrades from a deck of cards that players assemble on a per-character basis before each game. In minute-to-minute play, this doesn't feel much different to an item store in a traditional MOBA, but being able to unlock and tweak new bonuses outside of a match is new. The implementation of the card system is the roughest part of the current alpha, and the most difficult to assess in a limited play session. It suggests the kind of longterm depth that will sustain interest, but it also presents the biggest barrier to entry in terms of learning. How deftly *Paragon* walks that line will be crucial, but the game certainly sets a promising precedent elsewhere. ■



Action replay

Both the PC and PS4 versions of *Paragon* will feature a powerful suite of replay tools that can be used to pore over your past games. You can filter the replay timeline for particular moments and slow down time to take note of everything that happened. The development team is looking into ways to allow players to share links that will instantly load particular parts of a replay: as *Paragon* stores game data and not raw video, this can be done very quickly. Epic envisages the tool acting as a teaching aid, allowing skilled players to illustrate guides with relevant replays. The studio also wants to support the creation of highlight reels and machinima, and the feature also has clear implications for the game's competitive future.



KNIGHTS & BIKES

An affectionate salute to the joys of childhood

Developer/publisher	Foam Sword
Format	PC, PS4
Origin	UK
Release	April 2017

Though it's too early to determine the exact balance between exploration, combat and narrative (Crowle says roughly a third of each as a ballpark estimate), a branching dialogue system will give both Nessa and Demelza opportunities to make themselves heard





KNIGHTS & BIKES





Orphan Nessa is the quieter of the pair – as a mainlander, she's treated with a degree of suspicion by most of Penfurzy's residents, with the energetic Demelza the notable exception

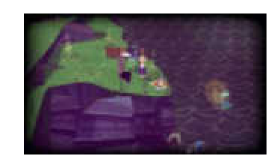
Developers often talk about their cultural influences, and when you've been doing this job as long as we have, you notice the same handful of names cropping up. The Goonies, it's fair to say, is rarely one of them – which makes a pitch that name-checks it all the more intriguing. Not that you'd immediately recognise the inspiration from a first glance at *Knights & Bikes*. Its heroes are two young girls, a seaweed-obsessed goose, and the sentient decapitated head of a legendary knight, and they're exploring an island just off the coast of Cornwall, throwing Frisbees and angrily pecking at the bewitched creatures that cross their paths. Our memories aren't what they used to be, but that's not *quite* how we remember it.

Of course, Media Molecule's **Rex Crowle** and *LittleBigPlanet* programmer **Moo Yu** aren't interested in direct pastiche or homage – they're aiming to capture the adventuring spirit of Richard Donner's 1980s favourite. It's a concept the pair have been kicking around for a while, having discussed their mutual affection for the film over a few drinks. "I was busy on *Tearaway* so we didn't really do a lot with it," Crowle tells us, "but I remember Moo and I felt we could do something really interesting by taking RPG-style mechanics and blending that with a Goonies-style story, with multiple kids, each with their own personalities."

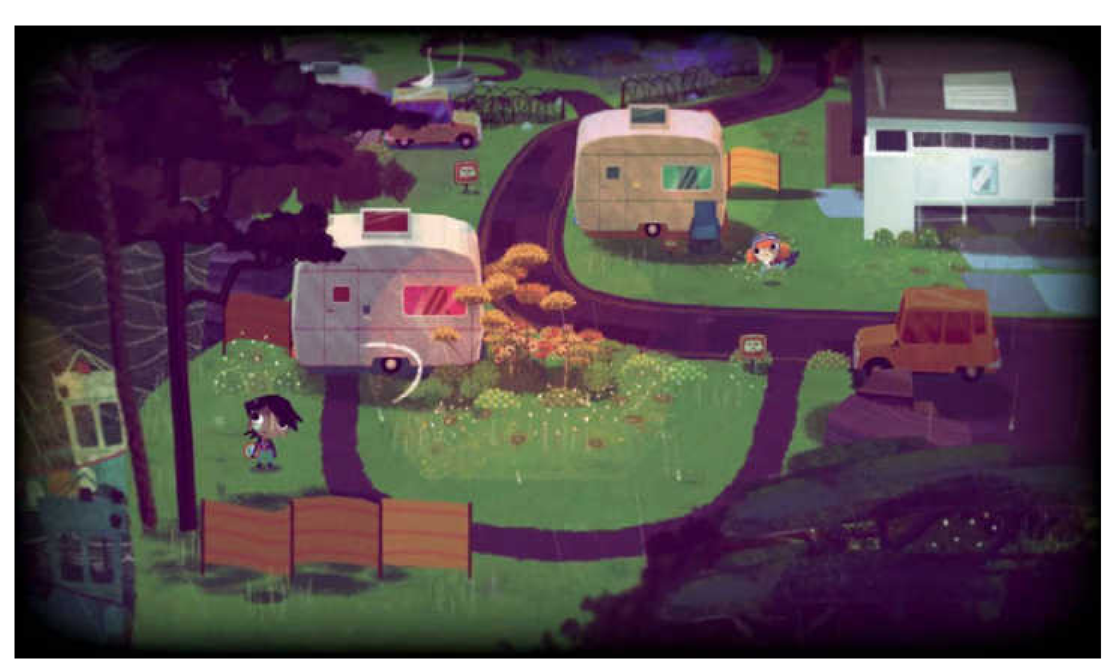
The two spent the best part of 12 months mulling the idea over before starting production last year, setting up under the name Foam Sword just as development on *Tearaway Unfolded* was wrapping up. Crowle is still working two days a week on *Dreams*, but the rest of his time is now being spent on *Knights & Bikes*. By the time its crowdfunding campaign was ready to launch ("a friend from Double Fine warned me that it's like announcing a game and shipping it all in one month," Crowle laughs), Foam Sword had a very firm vision of what the game was going to be, which is illustrated by one of the most distinctive Kickstarter projects to date.

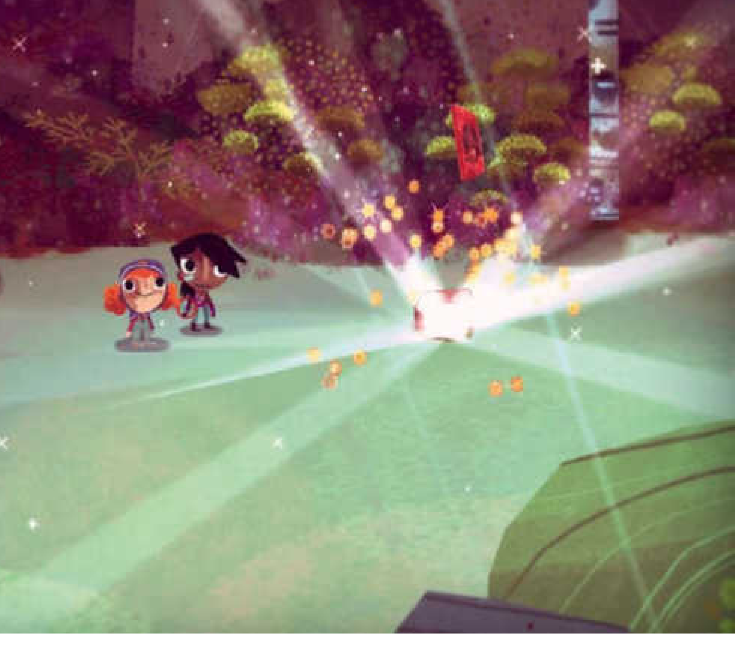
Characters were a key focus during the early discussions. "We had a group of kids that were much more generic," Crowle tells us. "We had the nerd and the jock, and we were both trying to mash them up and upset all the stereotypes." Over time, potential protagonists were gradually excised, with none of the boys making the final cut. The two that remained were outsider Nessa and the hyperactive, videogame-obsessed Demelza. If they're hardly archetypes, their relationship has that classic odd-couple dynamic; what the two girls share is a restless desire to spread their





ABOVE CENTRE **Demelza's pet goose, Captain Honkers, has a keen sense of smell, which serves as a useful navigational aid. The island's menagerie tends towards the avian: as well as geese, you'll come across woodpeckers and puffins.** ABOVE **Each islander you rescue will reward you in some fashion: a few have useful abilities, while others will give you key items**





In co-op, the girls won't be able to explore separately beyond the limits of a single screen. With teamwork central, Foam Sword hopes players won't want to anyway



Knights & Bikes is mostly a two-man project, but Crowle has been able to call upon Media Molecule colleagues for assistance. Sound designer Kenny Young and composer Daniel Pemberton (see p20) both worked on *LittleBigPlanet*

wings. "We're going for very universal memories of childhood," Crowle explains. "Of getting on your bike and cycling around and treating the world like it really is an adventure. Where you're trying to deal with all these mysteries and questions. Like that locked-up concrete bunker in the middle of the woods – what's happening in there?"

There is, too, an element of nostalgia for a time when games were an important part of the early lives of both developers. Through Demelza in particular, *Knights & Bikes* will explore the way in which games can become a way for kids to interpret the world around them; there are direct references to Nintendo's SNES and other consoles of that era, though you won't see much in the way of meta-commentary. "Videogames have always been a big part of our lives," Yu says. "It's a game about childhood and imagination, and both of us used videogames when we were kids to sometimes escape the real world but also occasionally to just find a character that we loved living in. There will be a bit of a celebration of videogames, and what it was like growing up with them."

This idea of forging bonds through shared experiences means that while solo players will always have an AI ally to accompany them, Yu suggests it's ideally played with someone alongside you. "It's set at a time where these kids are trying to figure out who they are and how they fit together to become better individuals, and we thought co-op was a really nice way to better mirror that kind of theme." Experience comes in a more tangible form, too: as the two girls find hidden treasure and rescue islanders they'll earn upgrades for their bikes to reach new areas, adding thicker tyres to negotiate patches of slippery mud, for example. A knight, of course, needs an appropriate weapon, and you'll be able to mount a medieval lance on the front of your two-wheeled steed.

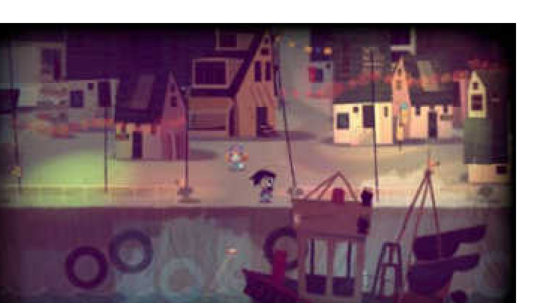
You'll have plenty of jousting practice, too, though combat is mostly conducted on foot. "There's an uneasy relationship between making a really beautiful game and then having combat in it," Crowle concedes. "So we're trying to make sure the combat is part of the ethos of the game, where you've got that kid-like feeling of having loads of energy, loads of imagination, and dealing with all these situations in a slightly scrappy way." There will be plenty of interplay between the two leads: Nessa, for example, can throw water balloons onto the ground to make puddles which Demelza can jump into with her wellies in order to splash everyone with mud – which, naturally, may well make ancient knights a little rusty.

"We're going for very universal memories… treating the world like an adventure"

Knights & Bikes' freewheeling, unique, experimental spirit, together with its blend of humour and melancholia strongly recall Foam Sword's other big influence, *EarthBound*. No game since has quite captured that same nervy excitement of expanding one's boundaries, tinged with the sadness of saying farewell to a part of your life. Not that it'll be too heavy-going: there are moments of introspection, sure, but this is a celebration.

"We're trying to capture the joyfulness of childhood," Crowle says. "Of careening down a slope on a bike with no brakes." A shift away from the comfort of a larger studio marks new territory for Foam Sword, but this thrillingly singular adventure is clear evidence that Yu and Crowle are more than happy to let go of the handlebars, screaming at the top of their lungs all the way down. ■

"We wondered if the appeal was just in our heads," Yu says, "but people have gotten incredibly excited about it, which is exactly what we were hoping for"





The lonely island

Crowle was raised in Cornwall, but the game won't be too autobiographical. He has, however, recently been revisiting his old stomping grounds, and spent a weekend sketching at a scrapyard down in the south west. "I think in order to capture this element of magical realism it's important to accurately represent locations a little more than you sometimes see in games…" This only goes so far, though. "When I joined the industry I had a much stronger Cornish accent, and I've had to kind of of lose that because no one took me seriously," he says. "I want to make sure the characters are fully rounded, that they're not just standing there in smocks, chewing on a bit of straw."



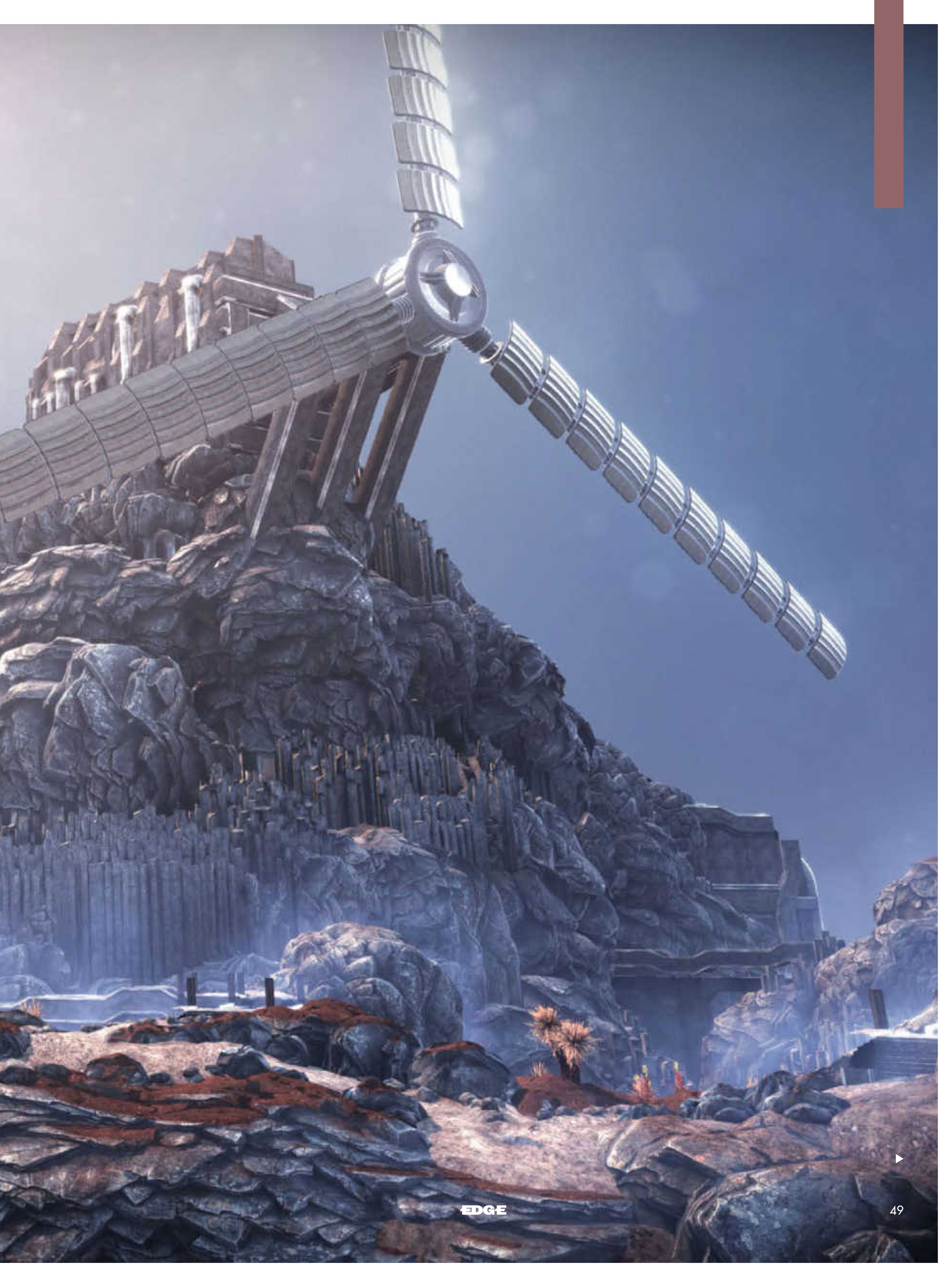
H | Y
P | E

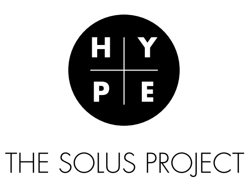
THE SOLUS PROJECT

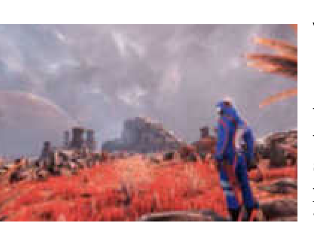
A sci-fi survival game that wants you to live

Developer	Teotl Studios
Publisher	Grip Digital
Format	PC, Xbox One
Origin	Sweden
Release	May

The original *Unreal, Tomb Raider* and Lost are key influences here. "It's about that feeling of adventure you get from [discovering] ancient temples, weird constructions, traps and secrets," creative director Sjoerd De Jong says







It's crucial not to make the landscape too alien, De Jong tells us: "No one is going to be able to immerse themselves into something that's completely strange, so that's why the planet still looks a little bit like Earth"

We have to admit, we'd never previously considered whether windmills were cool. Then again, we hardly expected we'd stumble across one while exploring an alien planet in Teotl's sci-fi survival game. And yet there it is, proudly protruding from a large outcrop. "It makes no sense from a practical point of view," creative director **Sjoerd De Jong** concedes. "But it's really cool!"

Strange as it may seem, we're inclined to agree. The windmill is a delightfully incongruous sight, only adding to the ambience of inscrutability that makes the early hours of *The Solus Project* so absorbing. Discoveries like this, after all, compel players to explore more, if only to see what other oddities might await around the next corner. "I think if you have an exploration game like this, you need these mysteries," De Jong adds. "You need something that drives you."

"You still die every now and again, but we want to make sure you have a nice time"

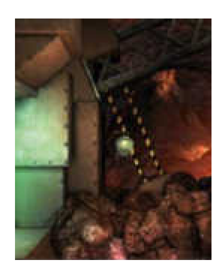
This is, perhaps, the key difference between De Jong's game and the welter of survival sims that have washed up on Steam's shores in the past few years. As publisher Grip Digital is keen to underline, *The Solus Project* isn't your typical sandbox adventure, but a more linear game with a stronger narrative. There's a natural fascination in how survival games explore the human will to live against the starkest odds, but after a time the appeal of self-preservation starts to wane: for existence to have meaning, we need a sense of purpose, a reason to plod on, and that's something *The Solus Project* handles better than most. Once you've crafted a makeshift torch and found some shelter, it's not long before you locate a teleportation device that allows you to bypass an obstruction blocking the entrance to a cave, with subsequent findings convincing you that you may not be, as you'd first thought, alone.

FROM TOP **Creative director Sjoerd De Jong and co-founder Jakub Mikyska**

On the default difficulty and above, there's a lot still to think about just to keep going: happily, a portable device carried in your left hand will let you know when your body temperature drops or spikes, and when it's time for a snack or to start looking for a source of water. If you'd rather the challenge of looking after yourself took a back seat to more leisurely exploration, however, you're in luck: Teotl has included a difficulty slider that entrusts players to set a challenge that suits their needs. "We've scaled it down a lot over two-and-a-half years of development," De Jong tells us. "In the beginning, it was far, far more difficult and everyone seemed to die within a minute. But people who maybe aren't seasoned survival players can get through on Medium [difficulty] – they'll probably die a few times, but it's more fairly balanced."

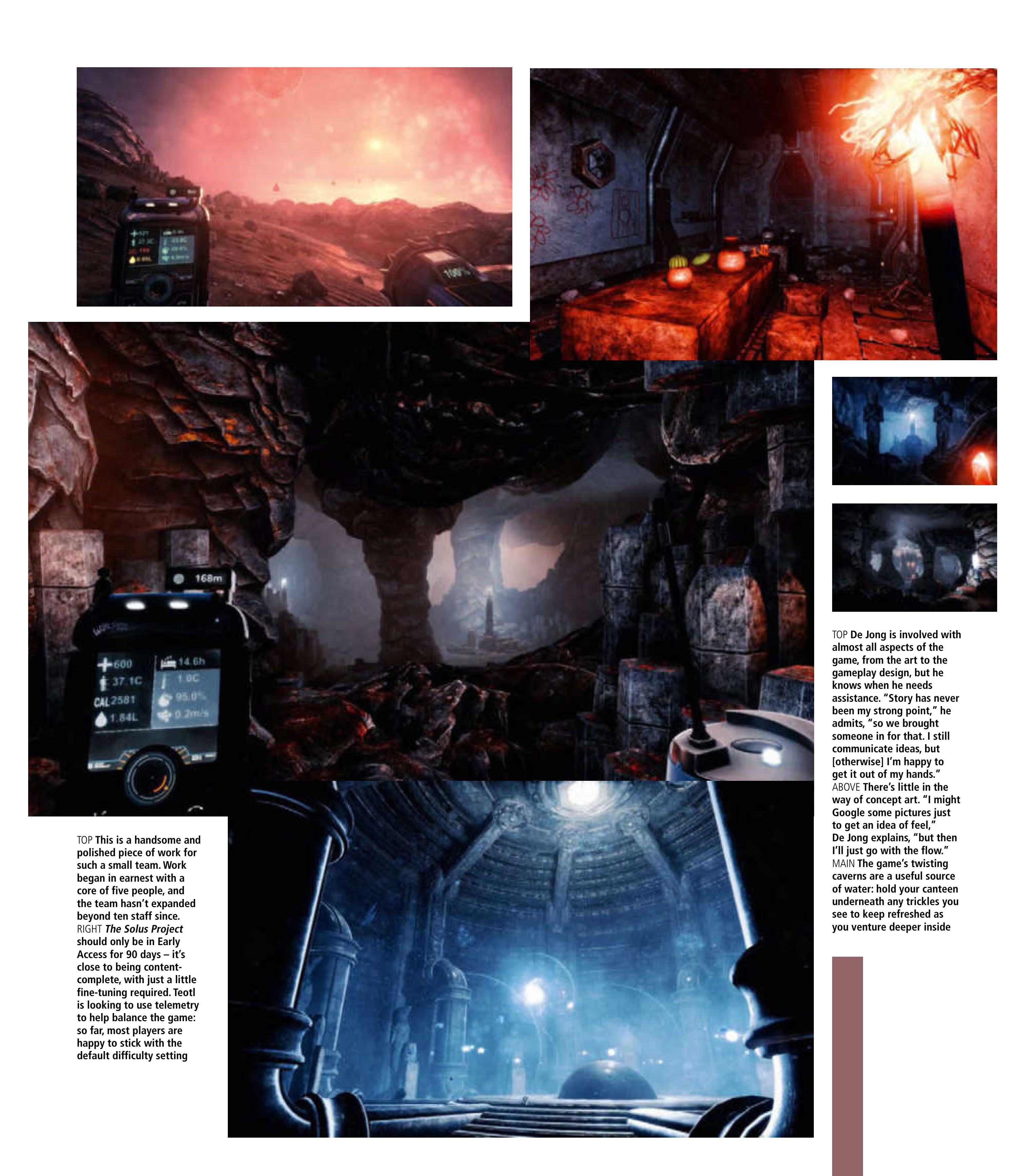
Even on the very lowest setting, there are environmental hazards that represent a threat to the player, but for the time being, at least, there are no enemies to worry about. This was, in part, inspired by the response to Teotl's 2010 puzzler *The Ball*: people enjoyed the firstperson conundrums enough to find the game's enemies a needless distraction. Likewise the ability to toggle waypoints and other visual aids. "There really does seem to be a group of people who just want to explore in a relaxing way," De Jong says. "I mean, you still tend to die every now and again, but we want to make sure you have a nice time, that you're not walking around aimlessly through some sandbox environment, not knowing what to do. We want an experience where you can dream away in this magical, fantastic environment and [still] make progress."

If this combination of otherworldliness and earthy realism is particularly on trend at a time when so many designers are preoccupied with space and survival, De Jong's no bandwagon-jumper: this has evidently been on his mind for quite some time, even before development began in earnest in the summer of 2013. *The Solus Project* is at once a product of his expertise as a level designer and environment artist, and his love of the natural world. "I think as an indie, you can do two things," he muses. "You can either build the games you think people want to play, or you can build the games that *you* want to play, and hope your passion shines through – and that a lot of people share that same passion." ■



Seeking Solus

Czech publisher Grip Digital previously collaborated with De Jong on 2012 puzzler *Unmechanical*, whose *Extended Edition* launched on consoles last year. "Both sides were quite satisfied," co-founder **Jakub Mikyska** tells us. "We were able to get on the same wavelength, and then Sjoerd showed us the next project he'd been working on. When we saw the game for the first time, it actually looked a lot like *The Solus Project* you see today, so we had a good idea of his goals and immediately knew it was a game we wanted to be a part of." With the likes of *DayZ* and *Subnautica* dragging their heels on their move to consoles, Mikyska is confident *The Solus Project* has a shot at becoming a landmark for the survival genre on Xbox One.



TOP This is a handsome and polished piece of work for such a small team. Work began in earnest with a core of five people, and the team hasn't expanded beyond ten staff since. RIGHT ***The Solus Project*** should only be in Early Access for 90 days – it's close to being content-complete, with just a little fine-tuning required. Teotl is looking to use telemetry to help balance the game: so far, most players are happy to stick with the default difficulty setting

TOP De Jong is involved with almost all aspects of the game, from the art to the gameplay design, but he knows when he needs assistance. "Story has never been my strong point," he admits, "so we brought someone in for that. I still communicate ideas, but [otherwise] I'm happy to get it out of my hands." ABOVE There's little in the way of concept art. "I might Google some pictures just to get an idea of feel," De Jong explains, "but then I'll just go with the flow." MAIN The game's twisting caverns are a useful source of water: hold your canteen underneath any trickles you see to keep refreshed as you venture deeper inside



Developer/publisher Prospect Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin UK
Release 2016

UNBOX

Special delivery: a soggy, banged-up, bouncing cardboard box



Move over, Amazon drones. *Unbox*'s Global Postal Service would like to present the *real* next-gen of shipping solutions: the self-delivering box. You're the latest prototype of this revolutionary endeavour, a cardboard cube capable of self-propelled motion. You bobble along awkwardly, but at a surprising lick, and are blessed with surprising agility for an object that's all straight edges and sharp corners. You can jump with a tap of the right trigger, and with a squeeze of the left one you'll perform the titular 'unbox', shedding an outer skin for a burst of mid-air momentum in what is surely the most oddly conceived double-jump in videogame history. Or hextuple jump, if you're so minded.

It's rather more appealing than its cardboard exterior would have you believe

The unbox can be performed six times before your supply runs dry, and provided you've built up enough speed before setting off you can comfortably traverse the lengthy expanses of water between islands in the first of *Unbox*'s worlds, Paradise Islands. Your stocks can be topped up with health pickups, or replenished at one of the generously spaced post-box checkpoints, but in between this is a game of careful management of your supplies. Your only offensive manoeuvre is a ground pound, which stuns enemies; when properly placed it can knock aggressors off platforms or into the sea. But largely this is a game of escaping trouble, rather than dispatching it.



Unless a mission demands otherwise, anyway. One endows you with a homing firework launcher with a pleasingly generous auto-aim, asking you to take out rooftop snipers within a time limit. Others are more traditional 3D-platformer fare, and are oddly satisfying despite the potential for frustration inherent in building a platform game around a cardboard box with exaggerated real-world physics. It's a zippy, unruly thing, certainly, but it's tremendously responsive, and there's a silly little thrill in arresting momentum just in time before your avatar drops into what would, for a cardboard box, be a fatal swim in the crystal-blue sea. And throughout, the multi-jump mechanic has you thinking about the space around you in intriguing ways. One quest-giver asks you to trek to the top of a high tower. Following the path means navigating a tricky sequence of obstacles – how many of them could you bypass by simply unbox-jumping up the side?

Fourplayer splitscreen multiplayer sports a similarly novel spin on conventions. It's a pacy, madcap blend of racing, platforming and shooting with playful, slippery physics and wanton environmental destruction. Modern standards dictate that *Unbox*'s multiplayer mode should be online-enabled. However, Manchester studio Prospect Games is staying true to its roots and, currently at least, is limiting the game's multiplayer component to players in the same room.

Yet for all the nods to the past, *Unbox* feels oddly new – and for more than just its Unreal-powered physics. While it's far from the first contemporary indie game to take its inspiration from the golden age of 3D platformers and fourplayer splitscreen, the pleasures of its novel take on the genre conventions of player movement, and the slapstick comedy of its physics, mean this is no mere callback to its developers' childhoods. Yes, there are nods to the likes of *Katamari Damacy*, *Super Monkey Ball* and any number of 3D *Mario* games, but *Unbox* has an identity all of its own – and it's rather more appealing than its drab cardboard exterior would have you believe. While the state of the parcel's contents may lead the recipient to question the merits of a self-delivering cardboard box, the game itself is in fine shape. ■



Open up

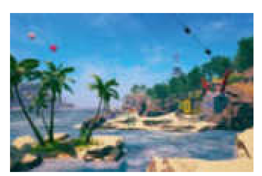
Unbox was born almost by accident in December 2014, when the small team at Prospect Games decided to spend the weekend at the office, taking part in Epic Games' monthly Unreal Game Jam. Unimpressed by Epic's chosen theme of 'What's in the box?', Prospect instead asked itself what the box was doing – and within a few hours a cardboard container was rolling around on a screen. With the team working almost exclusively in UE4's Blueprinting system, things have progressed rapidly since; the game passed the Steam Greenlight test with a single trailer and has since been confirmed for PS4 and Xbox One.





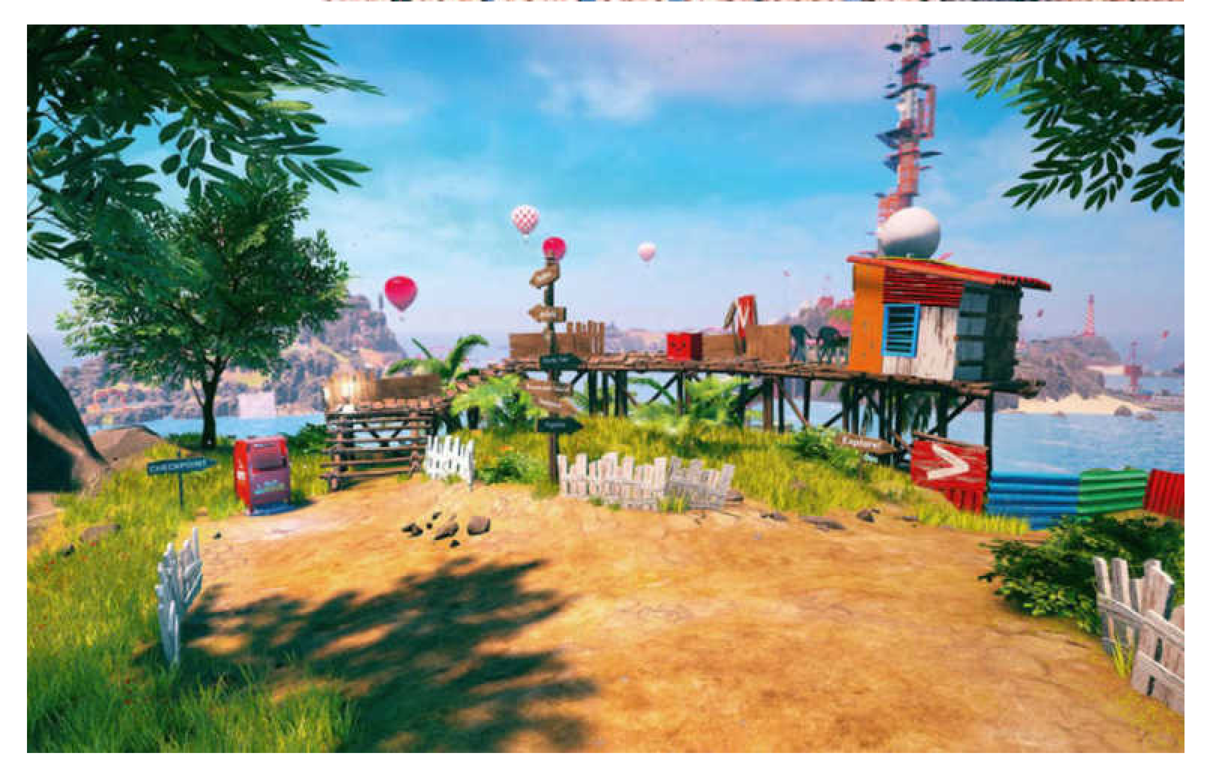
TOP **The bright sunshine of Paradise Isles makes for a fine opening to the game, while the *Super Mario Sunshine*-style soundtrack ensures the game's inspirations, and intentions, are immediately clear.**
RIGHT **The greasers are the antagonists in Paradise Isles, and contact with them sends our hero rocketing off-course at speed – and very often into the sea.**
BELOW **Paradise Isles centres on the location's radio tower. After restoring power with some buzzsaw-filled platforming sections, you climb to the top and take on the greasers' boss**







TOP **Customisation lets you kit out your parcel with skins, hats and accessories, and adds a welcome degree of personality to a game whose characters are, by design, about as drab as videogame stars get.**
ABOVE **Our build of the game includes a peek at the game's second area, a vast frozen tundra that's drastically bigger than Paradise Isles – while ticking the mandatory box marked 'Slippy Slidey Ice World'**





Developer PlatinumGames
Publisher Activision
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Japan
Release 2016





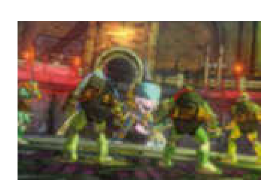
TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: MUTANTS IN MANHATTAN

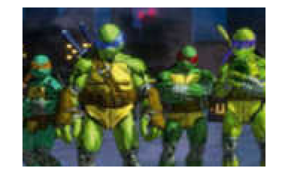
Tonight, Platinum's gonna party like it's 1989

This, if you're of a certain age, is the game of your childhood dreams: a *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* game with comic-book-perfect visuals and fourplayer online co-op, made by the best action-game developer on the planet. With *Transformers Devastation*, PlatinumGames proved that it has a knack for blowing the cobwebs off ageing intellectual property. Now it's looking to repeat the trick with the pizza-munching, surf-talking reptiles that were kings of the world for a spell in the late '80s and early '90s, spanning comics, movies, a cartoon and a highly lucrative toy line.

"I'm from a slightly older generation, so I didn't watch the TMNT cartoon and didn't realise quite how huge the Turtles were," director **Eiro Shirahama** tells us. "However, when we were putting the dev team together for the project I talked to staff members who grew up with the Japanese version of the cartoon. I was bombarded with stories about mutagen and Dimension X – even a case of Leonardo being someone's childhood crush. It was eye-opening, to say the least."

The development team is primarily composed of staff who worked on *The Legend Of Korra*, Platinum's first foray into licensed-game work for hire (on which Shirahama was also director), and *Transformers Devastation*. But staff from across Platinum have also got involved out of love for the source material. On paper, it sounds like a no-brainer, another way for Platinum to reskin its best-in-class action-game template for another group of childhood nostalgists. In reality, it poses several challenges to the way Platinum approaches making games. Shirahama admits the studio has changed tack a lot – "I'm sure we must have caused some migraines at





ABOVE **Assuming the game follows Platinum's classic structure of ranking performance in each of a section's levels, this could be the studio's most replayable game to date as you seek out Pure Platinum medals for all of the four characters**

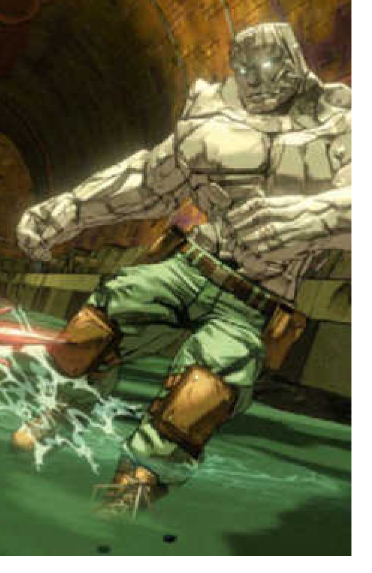


The screenshots released to date suggest a game of much greater environmental diversity than *Transformers Devastation*, which took place over the same handful of backdrops





Director Eiro Shirahama





LEFT **Along with Shredder and Krang, Bebop and Rocksteady are the most recognisable TMNT villains, a fixture in every form of Turtles media since its inception. While the pair were absent from the 2014 TMNT movie, they'll return in this summer's sequel**



TOP LEFT **The sight of a sewer section recalls *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, where a trip below street level reminded us of the way Platinum's thirdperson camera struggles in tight spaces. With four players on the screen, it will need to be better than ever.**
ABOVE **This isn't Platinum's first foray into online multiplayer – that accolade goes to 2012 brawler *Anarchy Reigns*. Hopefully the studio has made some improvements to its netcode in the intervening years**

Activision with our constantly changing ideas," he says – while the team worked out how to make its singleplayer action-game framework function in a co-op setting.

"Our games tend to feature incredibly fast and powerful characters," Shirahama says, "so we also need to provide enemies with even more extraordinary abilities to make sure there's a challenge. However, we would tune enemies to pose a solid challenge in singleplayer, but in a fourplayer environment, they would be absolutely trampled. You almost felt sorry for them.

"That was obviously detrimental, but we didn't want to nerf the player-character's speed or strength either. So our biggest challenge was to find a proper balance that worked in both single- and multiplayer. I think we reached a satisfying mix of mob enemies that are fun to beat up and bosses that will test your skills."

Each of the quartet feels slightly different, their fighting style tailored to fit the personality, and speciality, of the original characters. Leonardo is the katana-wielding all-rounder, designed for beginners. Donatello is meant for advanced players, dealing with multiple enemies at once with his bo staff. Raphael is slow, but hard hitting, while Michelangelo steams in, nunchuks blazing. Each character has access to Ninjutsu special moves, governed by cooldown times. You'll also be able to use the environment in battle – climbing walls, for example.

Platinum is also focusing on replayability, conscious that players will want to play through the game multiple times with different characters – another step out of its comfort zone. Yet with *Korra*, *Transformers* and now this, the biggest challenge facing the studio is staying faithful to the source material. The visual style was inspired by Mateus Santolouco, artist on IDW's TMNT comics, while IDW writer Tom Waltz has penned the script. But 32 years after the Turtles' comic-store debut, the studio has an overwhelming amount of reference material to call on, and remain true to.

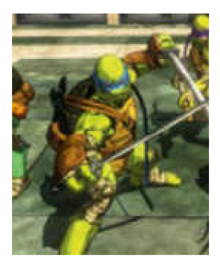
> ***"TMNT has such a rich history that it was difficult for us to figure out what to focus on"***

"TMNT has such a rich history that it was difficult for us to figure out what to focus on," Shirahama says. "We ended up mixing the light-hearted, comical nature of the '80s and '90s cartoon with the darker, more serious tones of the IDW comics and the 2014 movie.

"One of the most important aspects of developing a licensed title is to study and understand the IP, to make it your own, and to tune the design into something the current generation of players will find appealing. It's important to correctly identify the elements that will make fans go, 'Yes! *This* is the TMNT game I've always wanted!'" From what little we've seen, Platinum's off to a positive start by putting ticks in all of the right boxes. ■



Shirahama says the turtles' fighting styles reflect their personalities: "Sense of justice, strength, wisdom and cheerfulness." We're presuming the last, a reference to Michelangelo, was a mistranslation of 'being annoying'



On the way?

With this being Platinum's third licensed game in as many years – another '80s nostalgia play – it's tempting to imagine Activision and Platinum management working slowly through a list of long-running, beloved cartoons that the studio can rework into action games. What might the studio turn its hand to next? "I don't think the revival of IPs like Transformers and TMNT is restricted to the videogame industry – you see it happening in other media too," Shirahama says. "That said, speaking super-personally, I'd love to do modern takes on some of my favourite shows from the '70s, like The Six Million Dollar Man, The Bionic Woman, Wonder Woman or Mighty Mouse."



ROUNDUP

DEAD BY DAYLIGHT

Developer Behaviour Interactive **Publisher** Starbreeze **Format** PC **Origin** Canada **Release** TBA



This multiplayer survival horror is truly asymmetric, pitting a fast, powerful hunter using a firstperson camera against four agile survivors whose thirdperson perspective affords them greater environmental awareness. The foursome can craft tools and set traps, and will be rewarded for cooperation, but survival at any cost might well require more selfish play. The pursuer comes in different forms, with some capable of supernatural powers, while procedurally generated stages should keep players on their toes. Behaviour's track record may not inspire confidence, but Starbreeze's experience makes this one to keep an eye on.

XENONAUTS 2

Developer/publisher Goldhawk Interactive **Format** PC **Origin** UK **Release** 2017



2014's *Xenonauts* riffed on *UFO: Enemy Unknown* to decent effect, but Goldhawk promises the follow-up will be less faithful – starting with a move from sprite-based art to fully 3D visuals. With a Cold War setting, revamped enemy designs and a fresh take on airborne combat, it should be a significant improvement. You'll be able to judge for yourself before its full release – it'll launch first on Early Access, albeit in a greater state of readiness than its predecessor did.

JALOPY

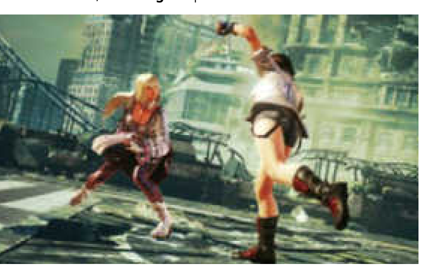
Developer Greg Pryjmachuk **Publisher** Excalibur Publishing
Format PC **Origin** UK **Release** TBA



Creative lead Greg Pryjmachuk is known for his work on the *F1* games, but here he's behind the wheel of something much slower. Set during the fall of communism, *Jalopy* hands you a ramshackle vehicle to drive around the Eastern Bloc as you trade and smuggle goods to keep your motor running.

TEKKEN 7

Developer/publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format Arcade, PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** 2016



Having been in Japanese arcades for a year, *Tekken 7* is getting an upgrade. Subtitled *Fated Retribution*, it'll offer more stages and costumes, but it's a surprising roster addition that's causing the most gossip. Could the appearance of Akuma finally mean the end for *Tekken X Street Fighter*?

DETECTIVE PIKACHU: BIRTH OF A NEW DUO

Developer Creatures Inc **Publisher** Nintendo
Format 3DS **Origin** Japan **Release** Out now (JP), TBA (US/EU)



Originally revealed in 2013, this most unlikely of *Pokémon* spinoffs has made a reappearance as a Japanese eShop title. Smartly presented, it plays like the investigative stages of *Ace Attorney*, with Pikachu's deep tenor prompting a web petition for Danny DeVito to voice the English-language edition.

SILVER
AVAILABLE FROM

zavvi.com ShopTo



OUT

PS4™


T3
The Gadget Magazine
MORE GREAT CONTENT AT T3.COM
GET FIT FAST IN 2016 WITH THE VERY BEST TECH FOR RUNNING, CYCLING AND MORE...
00:28:54

#291

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



Hidetaka Miyazaki rekindles the flame in a return to the series that made his name

By Nathan Brown



Game *Dark Souls III*
Developer FromSoftware
Publisher Bandai Namco
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release April 12



Even from a distance, he is unmistakable. We turn into a corridor and hear his repetitive, metallic clank. We see his sprawling grey mane and, below that, a burly, hairless torso. This near-final build of *Dark Souls III* has just arrived in Bandai Namco's UK office, and we are the first to play it. The PR rep looking over our shoulder gasps. We just about keep our cool. We approach Andre the blacksmith and his west country lilt is every bit as calming, yet motivating, as it was in 2011's *Dark Souls*. "Prithee, be careful," he ooh-arrs when our business is done. "Wouldn't want to see m'work squandered." For you, Andre, anything.

> NEVER HAVE DARK SOULS AND ITS SPIRITUAL COUSINS BEEN SO EXPLICITLY LINKED

Yet as delightful as it is to lay eyes on him again – and he really does look great, putting the generational gap between *Dark Souls III* and its predecessors in detailed, wildly hirsute context – Andre's return also lays bare the tension at the heart of *Dark Souls III*. This series, along with its spiritual predecessor *Demon's Souls* and PS4 spinoff *Bloodborne*, is built on a foundation of mystery and surprise. Five games in, the big question facing **Hidetaka Miyazaki** and his team at FromSoftware is how to continue to work with that approach when players become more familiar with your techniques with every passing game. How do you surprise people who think they've seen it all before?

"This is a difficult question," Miyazaki admits. "I believe all game developers face this from time to time, including me. And I don't have a concrete answer to it."

No, his answer is rendered in iron and steel, bent over a workbench at the end of a cold stone corridor. *Dark Souls III*'s first and greatest surprise is the one thing we've been trained to least expect from a Miyazaki game: familiarity. There has been connective tissue, of course, continuity across his games – a warming, welcoming hub area; re-used weapon names and voice actors; similar upgrade, travel and checkpoint systems. But never have *Dark Souls* and its spiritual cousins been so explicitly linked.

Andre may have moved from the bowels of a church in Lordran's Undead Parish to a dimly lit building in Lothric's Cemetery Of Ash, but his new digs are familiar, too. We're in Firelink Shrine. It's not quite the Firelink you know – it's an entire building here, with a network of corridors and a second floor, where a huge empty throne overlooks the bonfire. Could the stonework that supports it be the same as that which forms the crumbled ruins around *Dark Souls'* Firelink? Behind the fire is a little set of steps leading to an altar; is that not where the Crestfallen Warrior sits in Miyazaki's 2011 masterpiece? Are Lothric and Lordran one and the same?

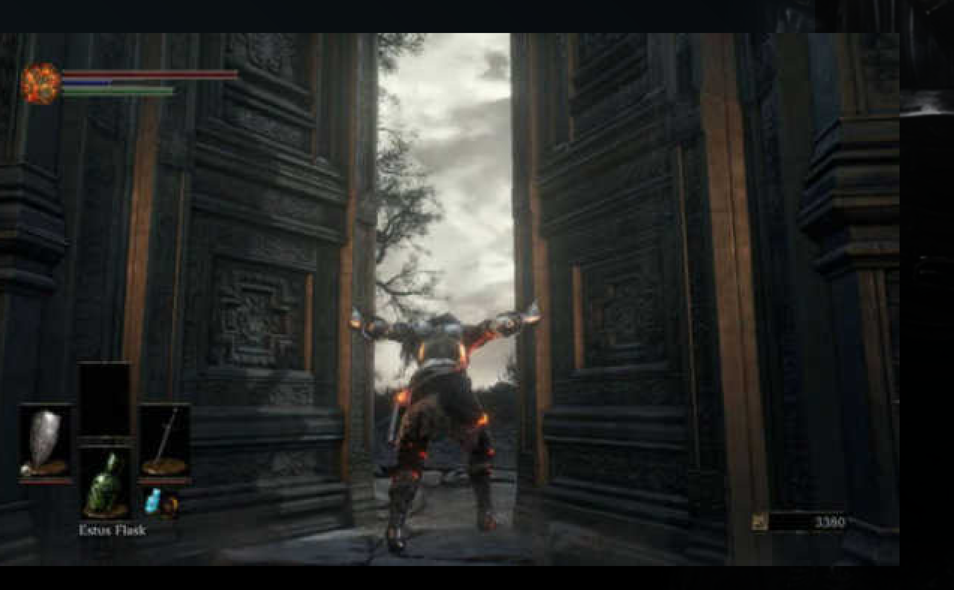
Not quite. You arrive at Firelink after the customary tutorial section and opening boss fight. The screen-sized stumbling block this time is Iudex Gundyr, a colossal knight who leaves behind a Coiled Sword when he dies.



Combat may be slower than in *Bloodborne*, but the influence is clear. Animations are weighty and bloody, while enemy movements are as unpredictable in Lothric as they were in Yharnam



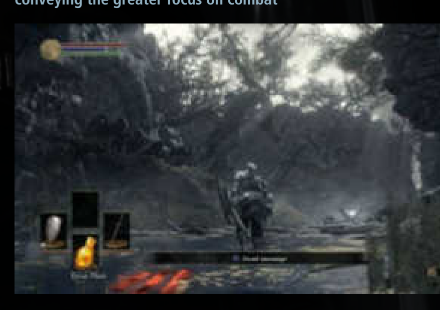
The themes for the game are 'decay' and 'withered beauty'. They're concepts that run through the entire visual and narrative design of the game, but are especially prevalent in the environments, lit throughout by a fading sun



Few studios can create quite so much tension with a simple portal as FromSoftware. A return to daytime after *Bloodborne*'s darkest night means opening doors onto new areas frequently floods the scene with bloom

It's not a weapon, but an item, to be plunged into the ashen pit in the centre of Firelink Shrine, magically creating a bonfire. While all of *Dark Souls'* roads led back to Firelink, and likewise Majula in *Dark Souls II,* we warp from this bonfire to the first proper area, High Wall Of Lothric. The world we arrive in is a coherent, flowing whole, but that initial warp implies that Firelink and Lothric are separate lands, giving Miyazaki cover to bring back a beloved base of operations, and the even more adored Andre.

High Wall Of Lothric continues the theme of familiarity: it was the setting for the behind-closed-doors demo when *Dark Souls III* was announced at E3 last year, and the one used for network stress tests in the intervening months. Even so, there are surprises, like the ▶



After *Bloodborne*'s flowing robes it's good to get back to steel and chain, though over several hours we do not find a single piece of armour – just weapons and shields. It's a smart way of conveying the greater focus on combat



Undead Settlement's dangling corpses and cages full of bones – and the boss characters' demonic transformations – suggest that *Dark Souls III* is about more than just the local populace going hollow



There'll be no fuss about lighting downgrades this time. When *Dark Souls III* gets dark, it gets very, very dark. A handmaid at Firelink sells a torch for a pittance – and you'll need it

archer pinging fire arrows from a small ledge above a doorway, or the bandit that attacks from behind while your eye was drawn to the hollow climbing up a ladder in front of you. But Miyazaki saves his greatest trick for the boss fight. We had long assumed, and at E3 learned for sure, that FromSoftware's president was no great fan of the preview circuit – that he would prefer his games landed on shelves fully formed, without any sort of prior showing. Publishers and fans demand otherwise, however, and so at E3 last year we saw a battle with a boss, the Dancer Of The Frigid Valley, in the nave of a burning church.

There's an intriguing treatment of trees in the game: here, a group of enemies kneels in prayer around one, and on the High Wall Of Lothric other hollows have become entwined in them and died



So after we arrive at the churchyard, and have battled on burnt-red autumn leaves with a succession of intimidating knights, we turn towards the church and pause. We know there's a boss in there. So we turn and head the other way, down a long flight of stairs and through a door into a large, empty arena. But hold on a minute. This doesn't look good. A cutscene triggers a fight against a boss we've never seen before, Vordt Of The Boreal Valley, an ice-blue canine with a giant mace. After a couple of deaths, both caused in part by a new, stamina-hindering status effect called Frostbite, we put Vordt to the sword. We head back up the stairs, take a breath, and enter the church, braced for another boss battle. Inside, sat on a chair, is a friendly NPC who offers up warm words of reassurance, and an item that's essential to our progress. We've been had. E3 was a prank. Hidetaka Miyazaki spent the biggest videogame show on the planet setting up a quite exquisite piece of trolling.

Despite Miyazaki's sleight of hand, we know what to expect from the first hours of one of his games. We are still as cautious as ever and make full use of the shield that was taken away from us in *Bloodborne*, inching cautiously around blind turns, checking our corners like a Navy SEAL. But our focus is no longer squarely on the path in front of us: we've zoomed out a little, trying to decipher what these opening hours can tell us about the game as a whole.

We look for little details, see what's changed from previous *Souls* games, what's been brought across or left behind. In *Dark Souls*, your first weapon upgrade required a single Titanite Shard; in *Bloodborne*, you needed three. Here, ▶

WE MAKE FULL USE OF THE SHIELD THAT WAS TAKEN AWAY FROM US IN BLOODBORNE

We don't yet know why he's here, or what new powers his smithying might bestow this time around, but it feels good to see hairy old Andre again

STYLE OF THE CREATOR

A couple of thousand hours of play later, we think we've got a reasonable handle on what makes Hidetaka Miyazaki the game designer tick, but what about the man as a player? Is he a *Bloodborne*-style combatant, all pacy aggression, or does he prefer to sit back and fling spells from afar? "My favourite character type is the mysterious one," he says, a revelation that will surprise no one. "I especially like those who wear heavy armour and carry a shield, facing their enemies with a stiff, immovable attitude. As for weapons, I like to use a mace or sword. It doesn't matter if it's a straightsword or a greatsword – I like something that can thrust. I don't use projectiles often, but I will use a crossbow in critical situations."

The crossbow's weapon skill, which fires off multiple bolts in quick succession, means that what was previously one of the weediest options for ranged battle is now capable of dishing out the damage. Perhaps that came at Miyazaki's insistence: he certainly seems happy enough with the changes his team has made to some of his favourites. "In *Dark Souls III*, we've added new mace skills and tweaked the stats on the Lightning Spear. It really fits my playstyle now, and I'm very happy with it." No doubt the staffer that implemented it feels a little safer in his job, too – if Miyazaki's boss designs are any guide, it's easy to envision him as quite the taskmaster.

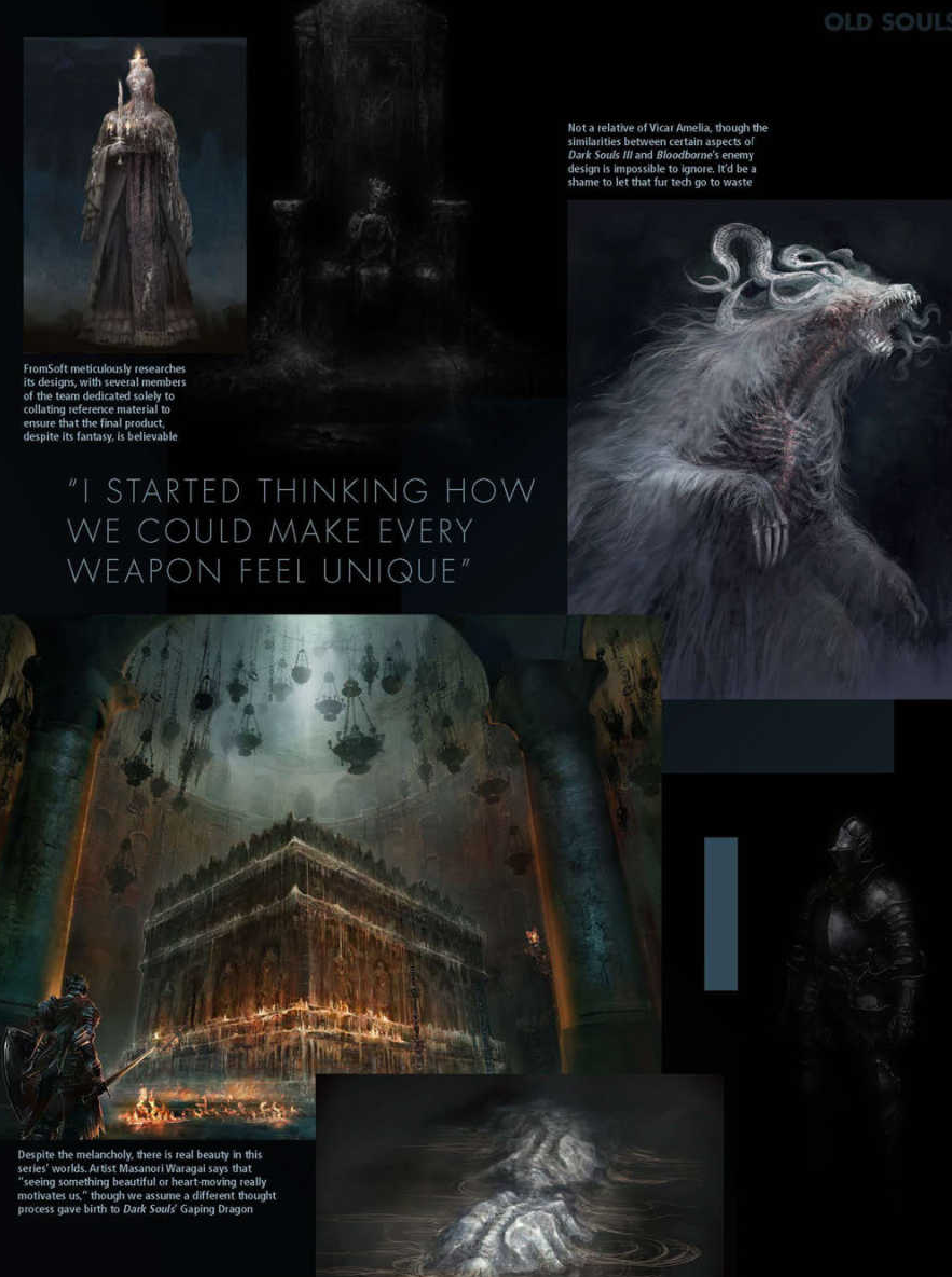


you need two. Losing Humanity in *Dark Souls* prevented you from summoning; in the sequel, you lost a chunk of health. Here, a new status, Ember, boosts your health bar until your next death. *Dark Souls* gave you five swigs of your health-restoring Estus flask; the sequel gave you one at the start, though let you increase that with Estus Shards, and offset the pain with another healing item, the Lifegem. Here, you start with three swigs, and Lifegems are gone.

It's tempting to see this as drab, iterative sequel-making, restructuring pre-existing systems in an arbitrary way to justify the new number on the end of the game's title. But there is logic here: *Bloodborne* had far fewer weapons than a *Souls* game, so its upgrade economy was balanced in kind. *Dark Souls II*'s healing system was a little too generous and its Humanity system too punitive. And besides, *Dark Souls III* will fundamentally alter the way you view, and use, the weapon in your hand and the flask on your hip. For all the familiarity of its setup and systems, *Dark Souls III*'s combat introduces substantial change.

"After developing the first *Dark Souls*, I started thinking about how we could make every weapon feel unique, and give more depth to the RPG," Miyazaki says. "In *Bloodborne*, I introduced the concept of transforming weapons, which I thought really fit the *Bloodborne* world. For *Dark Souls III*, we have weapon skills. In the first *Dark Souls*, players could use the default longsword from beginning to end if they wanted to. So we thought we could give more depth to a simple longsword with the addition of skills. We really enjoyed coming up with ideas for them; when you use one, I think you'll see how much fun we had." ▶

They call it the High Wall Of Lothric with good reason. *Dark Souls III*'s starting area takes you across ramparts to rooftops in a fine callback to the first *Dark Souls*' opening hours



FromSoft meticulously researches its designs, with several members of the team dedicated solely to collating reference material to ensure that the final product, despite its fantasy, is believable

Not a relative of Vicar Amelia, though the similarities between certain aspects of *Dark Souls III* and *Bloodborne*'s enemy design is impossible to ignore. It'd be a shame to let that fur tech go to waste

"I STARTED THINKING HOW WE COULD MAKE EVERY WEAPON FEEL UNIQUE"

Despite the melancholy, there is real beauty in this series' worlds. Artist Masanori Waragai says that "seeing something beautiful or heart-moving really motivates us," though we assume a different thought process gave birth to *Dark Souls*' Gaping Dragon



This churchyard leads up to what we thought was going to be a boss fight – in fact it's down the stairs to the right. One of the knights here drops a greatsword, though its stats don't put it on par with the legendary *Dark Souls* equivalents

He's not wrong. The longsword offers a charging thrust and an uppercut. The rapier gains a flighty backstep into a sharp thrust, or a surging flurry of attacks. The whip comes with a swirling, multi-hit combo that staggers multiple enemies at once; spear-users can thrust forward with enough force to penetrate the heaviest shield; and crossbows let off a rapid volley of bolts. Magic users benefit too: spells become more powerful, and miracles offer extra buffs. It's a dramatic change. *Souls* weapons have historically been spreadsheets first and foremost, their worth defined more by the numbers on their inventory description than their effect. Stats are still important here, but the actual business of slicing and dicing feels more important, more dynamic, and a good deal more personal than in *Souls* games past.

One of the churchyard knights drops a greatsword, which we know will numerically favour our strength build. But we rather like our longsword's skills, and a couple of minutes later we've switched back to it despite the damage deficit. It means that, as in *Bloodborne*, you foster a closer relationship to the weapon at your side than you have in Miyazaki's other games. Finding new loot is more exciting as a result: you don't just examine the stats screen of your new toy, but equip it instantly, and fiddle around with its abilities. "There are more than 200 weapons to choose from," Miyazaki explains, happily.

This new system also adds a much-needed layer of complexity to ensure even *Souls* veterans have something to think about. Skills for heavier weapons are slow to start up and many animations move you significantly forward; you can't spam them out as an act of desperation, but must plan to use them and execute them correctly. There's a delicate risk/reward in the fact that you can only access them while holding a weapon with both hands, forcing you to put your shield away. And their use is restricted by a new blue bar that sits in between health and stamina meters in the top-left corner of the screen. *Dark Souls* has always been a game of meter management, of deciding whether to gamble your final chunk of stamina on another swing of your sword, or use it to roll to safety knowing you'll have to work your way back in. Now there is one more thing to think about.

"BECAUSE WE TOOK ADVANTAGE OF THE NEXT-GEN CONSOLES, THERE'S SO MUCH MORE COMPLEXITY"

The bar can be refilled by resting at a bonfire, but in between resting points can be topped up with the new, ice-blue Ashen Estus Flask. At the start of the game, you get one swig of Ashen and three glugs of regular Estus. However, a visit to Andre yields a new menu option, Allot Estus, that lets you choose how to split your available total between the two. After one too many deaths on a tricky boss fight, we warp back to Firelink and put our entire stock into health refills. Magic users, who can heal with spells or miracles, and PVP players who rely heavily on skill usage, may prefer to do the opposite. As if a game with 200 weapons needed any more possibilities. Skills are, like *Bloodborne*'s shape-shifting weapons, a transformative addition to a familiar template.

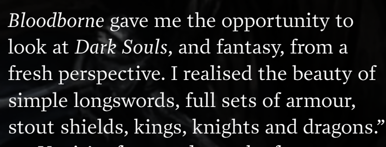


We hate these guys already. They use their saws for a combo that might stop short or hit you a dozen times, and getting behind them is no guarantee of success, since they often turn around mid-combo

'Like *Bloodborne*' isn't something we expected to say much when discussing *Dark Souls III*. After all, Miyazaki's Gothic-horror masterpiece was a spinoff, one that took a few sharp turns from the FromSoftware house style. We expected the two games to be similar technically: *Bloodborne* was the first game From built from the ground up for the current generation of consoles, and *Dark Souls III* uses its engine. But we didn't expect so much stylistic common ground. Combat is more dynamic in *Dark Souls III* thanks to the skills, and a good deal faster too – not quite *Bloodborne*'s pace, but certainly brisker than its direct forebears. Enemies behave in *Bloodborne*-like ways, patrolling areas rather than lying in wait, coming at you with unpredictable attack strings. And they work in groups, hitting extremely hard from the word go, those three swigs of Estus frequently used up within seconds of respawning at a bonfire.

It's a natural consequence, Miyazaki says, of development of the two games overlapping. "It definitely takes a lot of influence from *Bloodborne*. There's the technical side, of course, and its combat certainly inspired the battle system in *Dark Souls III*. But more importantly







The NPC in the church gives you a banner, which you wave at a cliffside to summon harpy transport. It recalls the trip to Anor Londo, though your destination is very different

Bloodborne gave me the opportunity to look at *Dark Souls*, and fantasy, from a fresh perspective. I realised the beauty of simple longswords, full sets of armour, stout shields, kings, knights and dragons."

Yet it's after we down the frost-breathing dog Vordt, step out onto a cliffside and travel by harpy-claw to *Dark Souls III*'s third area that the *Bloodborne* influence is most apparent, and most surprising. If you told us that Undead Settlement was a new *Bloodborne* DLC area, we would believe you without hesitation. Visually, you could bolt this tumbledown village onto the end of Hemwick Charnel Lane and we'd have been none the wiser.

Enemy designs are more Yharnam than Lordran here, too. Ashen-faced giants hurl gigantic urns and charge at us with blood-splattered saws. Singing, screeching, gargantuan sorceresses fling hexes from dark corners. Wizard-hatted midgets drop from the ceiling, and cages full of bones come alive and lurch for us as we draw near. There are still traces of *Souls'* DNA – a giant rat lurks in the sewers; a pack of dogs waits before the boss – but it's surprising, even a little jarring. To be fair, we should've seen it coming: before we've even plunged a mystical sword into the pit at Firelink Shrine we've seen a giant turn into a demon, and the hollows that worship the decaying sun along the High Wall Of Lothric are prone to suddenly sprouting giant tentacles and one-shotting you.

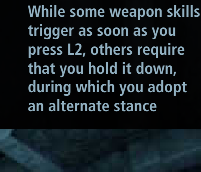
And what of the world beyond it? An NPC warns us against going into a chapel in the Undead Settlement, but the presence inside of another friendly face from the past compels us onwards. Sadly, on orders from Japan, we're forbidden from venturing into the next area, Road Of Sacrifices. But from what we've seen, Lothric is closer in design to *Dark Souls* or *Bloodborne* than *Dark Souls II*. You may be able to warp between bonfires but they're spaced farther apart than in the second game in the series, and in between them are plenty of shortcuts and shortcuts-to-be; elevators that aren't there, doors that are locked or only open from the other side, and so on. As for the game's overall size? Miyazaki, predictably, isn't giving much away.

"There's always the temptation to make a sequel bigger in size – doing so can effectively attract fans," he says. "But I don't personally believe we have to do it. The size of this game is about the same as *Dark Souls II*, maybe even a little smaller, but because we took advantage of the next-gen consoles, there's so much more complexity and depth there. The game may feature fewer areas, but you can never say it's not enough."

Miyazaki's love of secrecy may make for an occasionally frustrating interview – and in this age of information he must be infuriating to his publishers' PR departments – but those who know his games understand precisely why he does it. Surprise is everything in a *Souls* game. "I want to keep it a secret for now," he says, answering a specific question about his influences but which might as well have been the first line of his answer to everything. "I want players to enjoy simply playing the game. I don't want ▶



While some weapon skills trigger as soon as you press L2, others require that you hold it down, during which you adopt an alternate stance



to distract them with too much information before its release."

We've said it before, but the magic of the *Souls* games comes not from the challenge they pose to the player, but the respect that challenge represents. It's an expression of a developer's belief in its audience, that it need not patronise with excessive signposting and handholding, that the player is capable of anything. It might not feel like it sometimes – there were those few deeply unpleasant evenings we spent with the Capra Demon during our first *Dark Souls* playthrough, and Undead Settlement's boss, the Curse-Ridden Tree, soon makes us feel like all hope is lost – but FromSoftware loves its players. And Miyazaki knows that the feeling is reciprocated in kind.

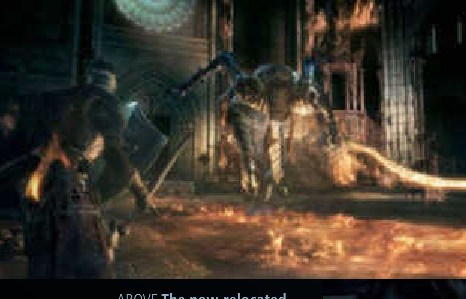
"We need ideas to challenge our players," he tells us. "To come up with ideas we need excitement, thrills and motivation. Player feedback is a great motivator for us. The *Dark Souls* series has diehard fans, and what they tell us gives us a real sense of thrill and excitement. They're a real source of energy for me. We don't accept all of it – we have our own vision to achieve – but it's precious to us. All of it."



"THE STORY OF DARK SOULS III SUGGESTS THE SERIES' CLOSURE, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN IT WILL END"

Bloodborne proved that the easiest way for Miyazaki to surprise veterans of the *Souls* series was to walk away from it. He's spoken in the past about his desire to make something different. After *Dark Souls* shipped he said he wanted to make something lighter in tone; he ended up making *Bloodborne*. And he's talked airily about his desire to explore sci-fi. Yet he seems unwilling, or unable, to turn his back on *Dark Souls* for good. He has, in previous interviews, described *Dark Souls III* as a turning point for the series, but also its closure; we press, but he stands firm. "At this moment, I don't know the answer to that. The story of *Dark Souls III* suggests the series' closure, but that doesn't mean the *Dark Souls* series will end. An attractive story leads to another story. I'm looking forward to hearing what players think of it."

And we're looking forward to finding out. Before this, our two ways of playing a *Souls* game were a frustratingly short ten-minute demo on a show floor or a 60-hour bender in which our every waking moment is spent either playing the game or wishing we were. This has been a generous sitdown with an unfinished game. It has told us plenty, but also nowhere near enough. The question of what Miyazaki and FromSoftware will do next can wait. First we've got another few hundred hours of wary exploration, punishing combat, build experimentation and wild lore theorising ahead of us. Another game in the company of *Dark Souls'* faded beauty, of Miyazaki's beloved knights with stout shields, of a series that might be growing familiar, but is still unlike anything else. April 12 can't come soon enough. ■



ABOVE **The now-relocated Dancer Of The Frigid Valley. Earlier demos ended with the church covered in flames; we don't know where From has put her now, though it'll struggle to match the symbolism of faith on fire**





ABOVE The Curse-Ridden Tree caused us no end of problems. Its first phase is straightforward enough, but later it drops to the floor below and summons a giant hand that's hard to keep track of in cramped conditions



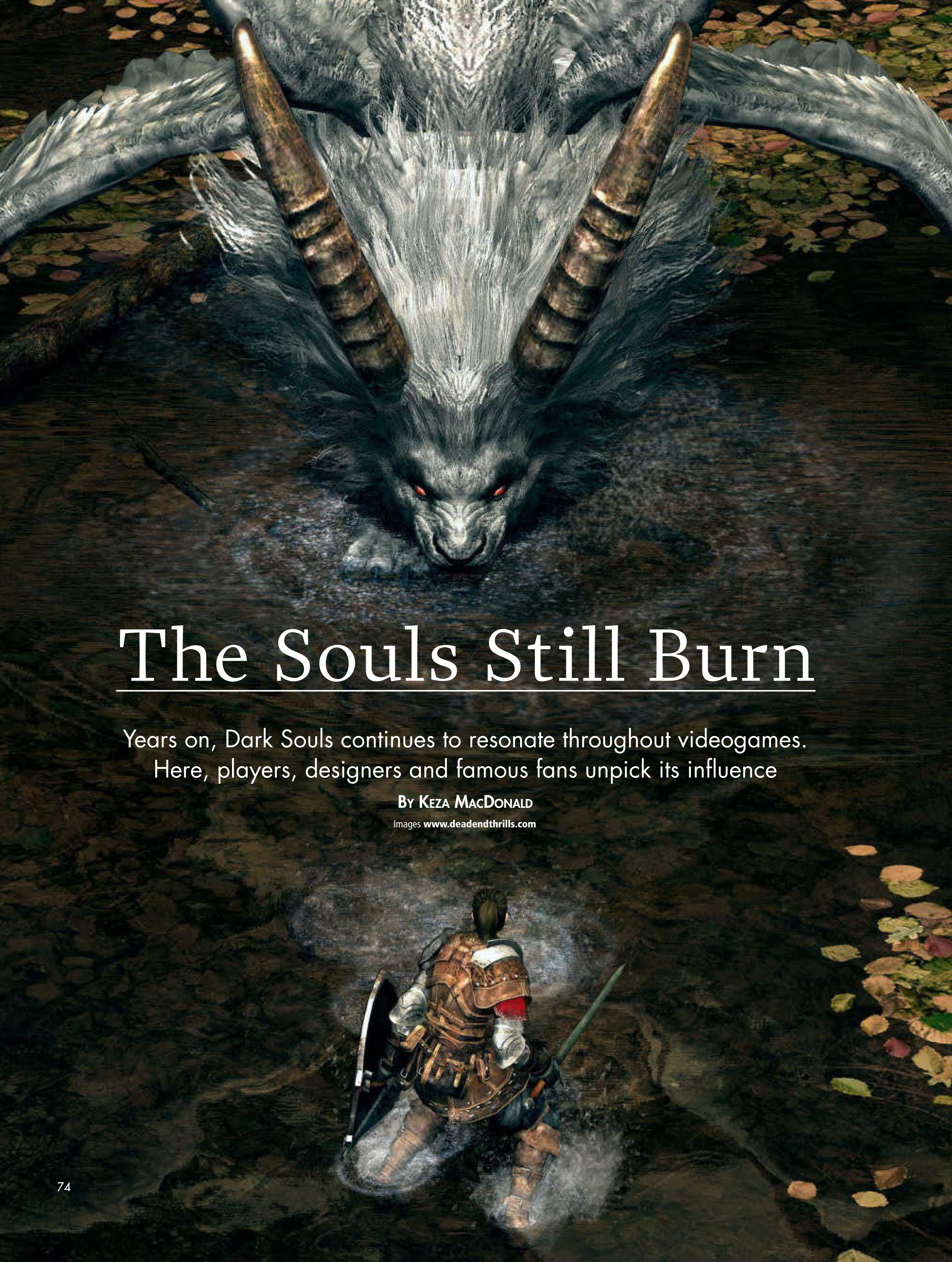
While most of Undead Settlement isn't the sort of place you want to hang around in, the boss run-up sees From deliver on the promise of withered beauty

PRESIDENTIAL OVERSIGHT

Miyazaki was busy with *Bloodborne* while *Dark Souls II* was being made, and fans who perceive the game to be the weakest in the series are quick to equate its relative quality with Miyazaki's absence. Given that he's now juggling his designer-director duties with his position as company president, and the fact that development of *Bloodborne* and *Dark Souls III* have overlapped, armchair pundits have suggested that he may not have been able to give the creation of *Dark Souls III* his full attention. Not so, according to From staffers.

"Once we come up with a design, we submit it to the director [Miyazaki] and he gives us his feedback," **Masanori Waragai**, FromSoftware concept artist, tells us. "Then we redesign and ask for more feedback again. The design goes back and forth between the design team and director until we get it perfect. We do extensive study and research, but Miyazaki is an expert at creating historical games set in the atmosphere of medieval Europe. We learn a lot from him."

Composer **Yuka Kitamura** describes a similar process of back-and-forth with Miyazaki on the soundtrack for the game's boss-battle themes. "Working that closely with him was a pleasure, an inspirational creative experience," she says. "It enabled me to create something I could never have created by myself." The end result certainly sounds very much to Miyazaki's taste. "I'm confident that the music for the boss battles is deeper, and darker, than ever," Kitamura says.



The Souls Still Burn

Years on, Dark Souls continues to resonate throughout videogames. Here, players, designers and famous fans unpick its influence

By Keza MacDonald

Images **www.deadendthrills.com**

It's understandable that games such as *Super Mario 64* and *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* would prove enormously influential, because they set the standard for different types of 3D worlds back when 3D worlds were new. It's understandable that games such as *Doom* and *Wolfenstein* would be cited so often as foundational works in the videogame form, because they wrote so many of the early rules of the firstperson shooter. When it comes to *Dark Souls'* influence on game design, though, it didn't invent new rules, or set new technological standards, or change the conception of what a videogame could be. What it did was make people think differently about *how* a game could be, and what players would appreciate.

Dark Souls proved that people actually respond well to being treated like adults and trusted to engage voluntarily with a game's challenges and systems, without having them explained to death beforehand. It proved that, as a game designer, you don't necessarily have to be so worried about scaring people off; that if a game is good enough, players can be trusted to find their way without having their hand held. It's a very liberating concept for many game designers.

"The best word to describe the *Dark Souls* series is 'confident'," says **Greg Street**, of *League Of Legends* studio Riot Games. "The games subverted conventional wisdom in a number of ways: the difficulty of the battles, the punishment for failure, and a general lack of explanation for how anything works. *Dark Souls* knows exactly what it wants to be and who its target audience is, and isn't interested in trying to attract players looking for a different experience. The percentage of players who beat the final boss is always low, and the game is fine with that."

Dark Souls has a lot of famous fans in the world of game design and publishing – including **Shuhei Yoshida**, the president of Worldwide Studios at Sony Computer Entertainment and one of the key figures behind the company's PS4. *Dark Souls* actually inspired elements of the console's design.

"The game design of *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* has been a good antithesis to the industry norm, when game designers are usually worried about stopping players' progress in the game, and provide lots of tutorials and assists," says Yoshida – who, as a long-time Sony employee, had also played and appreciated *Demon's Souls* when it launched on PlayStation 3. "The harder difficulty of the regular enemies, coupled with low health points for them, created a tense but always solvable situation for the player throughout the game and gave a much larger reward in the sense of accomplishment when you do succeed reaching the next checkpoint. The clever 3D level design is without match in the industry: it has a beautiful and intriguing level structure that assists progression.

"The asynchronous social connectivity introduced in *Demon's Souls* was truly a visionary feature, providing the players with a sense of playing together but not making it too intrusive like regular online multiplayer games. This feature has been an inspiration for many contemporary game designs, and now popular 'Share' features have been developed [on PS4], expanding on the experiences that *Demon's Souls* pioneered."

Yoshida's favourite *Dark Souls* moment is the final battle with Gwyn – even though he ended up watching from behind a pillar while two more experienced players parried the final boss to death. "I would've liked to beat the boss by myself, but I felt that this was nonetheless a legitimate way to succeed in this tough game – Miyazaki-san would be proud to hear my triumph using his generous game design," he laughs.





FROM TOP **SCE Worldwide Studios chief Shuhei Yoshida; Sigurdur Gunnarsson of *EVE* studio CCP**

> "The percentage of players who beat the final boss is always low, and the game is fine with that"

Many game designers point towards *Dark Souls'* lack of fear as a particularly fascinating aspect of its design, contrasting against conventional industry wisdom, which dictates that you can't piss off a player too much, otherwise they'll give up and walk away in anger. The fact that *Dark Souls* managed to walk the line so successfully between satisfying and challenging its players and making them want to defenestrate their controllers is one of the enduring mysteries of its design, and game designers have various ideas about how and why the approach works.

"When I first played *Dark Souls* it was such a breath of fresh air, and really showed me that games don't have to be too easy or hold your hand too much," says **Sigurdur Gunnarsson**, one of the co-creators of *EVE: Valkyrie*, a spinoff from MMO *EVE Online*. (He has just started his fourth playthrough of *Dark Souls 2*, experimenting ▶





FROM TOP **Ricky Haggett, designer of *Hohokum*; Tom Cadwell, VP of game design at Riot Games**

with a DEX/rapier build.) "People should be trusted to explore and discover things on their own. What I find fascinating about the *Souls* games is the emergent gameplay, and how you learn by [a mix of] trying and pure pattern recognition. You can't really say the game is unfair – it is consistent and totally up to personal skill.

"It's a great example of a game that is easy-ish to pick up but hard to master, something we've wanted for *Valkyrie* from the start. I plan to embody more of what the *Souls* series and that kind of gameplay stands for into my future projects."

"*Dark Souls* does things with difficulty curves and risk assessment that I've never seen before in a game," says **Zach Gage**, the conceptual artist and game designer behind titles such as *SpellTower*. "Once you've beaten the game and start reflecting on its structure, you start to notice some very clever things going on in the way the level design and difficulty curves intermingle. *Dark Souls* is structured like one long path wound around itself, sprouting off branching paths that sometimes reconnect and sometimes don't. The long main path has a relatively gradual difficulty curve: the beginning is easier than the end of it, and each area is slightly harder than the last. The branches, however, have random difficulties. Some of them are easier or the same as the part you are at, and some of them are substantially harder.

> "It does things with difficulty curves and risk assessment that I've never seen before in a game"

"When you pair this with the risky economy of the game, with the omnipresent risk of losing your souls, it creates a really fascinating system. The structure of the level design, the variety of weapon strategies, the learnable nature of the bosses, and the way you move around the world all come together to present a fascinating puzzle of optimisations and risk. As developers, it's rare that you get to play a game that does one singular truly new thing, but *Dark Souls* was just like from another planet conceptually. You can look at those aspects of its design and it's just not following any of the paths that things before it did, and it pulls off all of its new ideas just perfectly. *Demon's Souls* was the practice run for these ideas, but *Dark Souls* reaches a kind of *Mario* perfection, but in an alternate universe where videogames are about completely different things."

For Ricky Haggett, designer of the wildly creative *Hohokum*, *Dark Souls* brings him back to a time when games were more mysterious: when players got their information by talking with other kids in the playground rather than watching YouTube walkthroughs. "The game's full of secrets," he notes. "The sense you get when you play *Hohokum*, hopefully, and definitely *Dark Souls* and *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past*, is that as you're walking around there are all these secret things, sometimes completely hidden, sometimes just below the surface. You got it in *Doom* as well: below the skin there are tantalising, wonderful places you can get to if you can only figure out how. I mean, a lot of games have secret stuff hidden, but most of the time the stuff you find isn't very interesting, because the game itself isn't very interesting

"*Dark Souls* had the balls not to put massive fucking signposts everywhere to make sure you see everything. That feels super-special because even when you found a weird little thing in *A Link To The Past*, it was super-cool, but it was quite meagre – it might be a room with a weird guy in it who says a couple of lines of dialogue. Whereas in *Dark Souls* you find whole fucking worlds that had significantly more time and energy spent on them. In 95 per cent of other developers' games they just would've gone, 'Well, no one's going to see this, so we have to make sure someone sees this!'"

That depth – the knowledge that, as you play *Dark Souls*, there are countless things you won't have seen, and might only find out about years later during a conversation, or while watching someone play it online – is what fascinates **Seth Killian**, one of the most prominent designers in the world of fighting games. "I sometimes feel like a lunatic watching people swoon over other games," he says. "Meanwhile, I'm feeling like I'm playing something that does several of the seemingly disconnected things that other games do, at the same time, better, and also does seven other things that nobody ever even brings up.

"I get so crazy that even when some game site gives *Dark Souls* its Game Of The Year award. I'm all, 'Yeah, but you don't even *know*, man!' The only experience I can compare it to was being a young *Street Fighter II* nut, with its slow unfurl of potentially boundless depth, all while watching the game be deeply misunderstood by everyone ▶





else, even as they professed fandom and while the game was at its arcade heights. Miyazaki games are like finding Doestoyevsky's Notes From The Underground stuck into a comic-book rack at your local 7-11."

'Flexible' isn't a word often associated with *Dark Souls*; indeed, at times it feels infuriatingly the opposite, as you bang your head against the same wall for hours on end. But **Jochen Mistiaen**, whose first game, *Malebolgia*, was heavily influenced by *Dark Souls*, sees so much in the game that can be absorbed and repurposed in new, interesting ways. "You could in effect strip down *Dark Souls'* combat, take away the various weapons, stats and equipment builds, but still retain the core and satisfying enemy encounters and system, with its emphasis on timing and tactical movement," he says.

"The nice thing is that they can be stripped down yet still retain their appeal. In other words, I could as a developer create a smaller world with a more simplistic combat system yet still create something fun to play. It's easier to copy, in a way. Compare it for instance to RPGs, which need elaborate stat systems and stories, or other action games – *Devil May Cry*, for example – which need many different enemy and weapon types, or firstperson shooters that require long campaigns or a very robust multiplayer. The core elements of *Dark Souls* can be so easily replicated – in theory – that as a designer, you can more or less take any setting and scope, and visualise in your head how it would play out. It triggers the imagination in a way few other games have done before. I can visualise the gameplay and level design, rather than, as with many other genres or series, only story or set-pieces."

Looking back, you may remember that videogames went through something of an identity crisis in the mid-'00s, during which they continually tried to ape films, as if the creative apex of the videogame form was to be exactly like a movie. As graphical capabilities finally began to approach something close to realism, many big games started aspiring to the universal accessibility and emotional scope of film – and to achieve it, they employed the linear processes of filmic storytelling. It took a good while for games to emerge from this phase and realise that it didn't need to be this way; that they have their own ways of telling stories, their own ways of getting into your head. *Dark Souls* didn't start that counter-movement, but it was a large part of it.

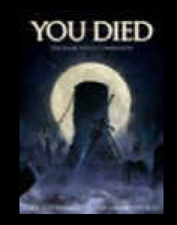
"For decades there was a largely financially driven movement to make games more and more accessible to hit an ever-larger audience," reflects **Tom Cadwell**, vice president of game design at Riot Games. "Somewhere along the way, the industry – in the race to make ever-more-accessible games – started to lose sight of how rewarding and challenging, and possibly punishing, games can be. There has been a recent trend of renewed interest in modernising these old game design approaches and introducing them to a new generation of gamers. *Dark Souls* was one of a few critical games that launched this renaissance by reminding players and designers alike that mastering a challenge is something hardcore gamers love.

"We're seeing this trend continue in other games through the continued interest in *Dark Souls*-like experiences, the revitalisation of the Roguelike genre, the continued growth of MOBAs like *League Of Legends* and *Dota 2*, and the popularity of sandbox open-world PVP games like *Rust*, *DayZ* and *Ark*." That's a lot of important games, all sharing something in common with *Dark Souls*.

Perhaps we're just at the beginning. The true extent of *Dark Souls'* influence may not be felt for another three, five, even ten years. "While *Souls* has obviously had a tremendous impact on the industry already, I think that the true effects are still a couple of years off," reckons **Marcus Sanders**, better known to the *Dark Souls* fan community as popular YouTuber EpicNameBro. "There are people in studios all around the globe right now who have been inspired to do something different with games – just as Fumito Ueda inspired Miyazaki-san. Some of them are indies, some of them are junior designers at large companies... A lot of them don't have a lot of visibility right now, but they're there. And they're much more connected to each other than you would ever imagine.

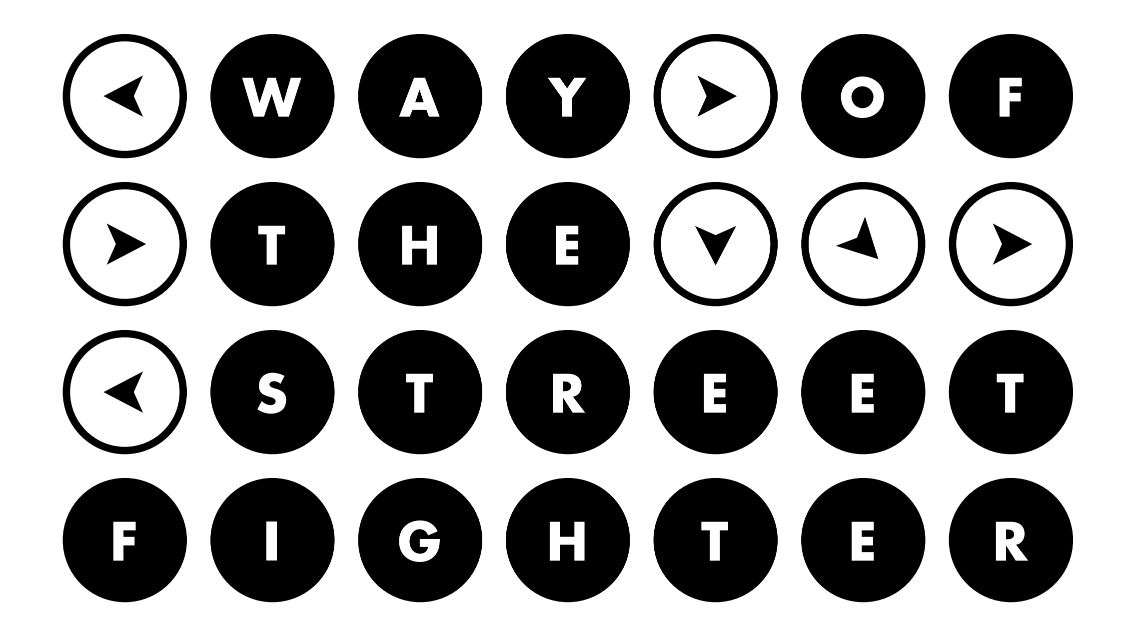
"That's the real power of this series. It draws people out and reveals their bonds. The community is already linked together in their ideas and interests. *Dark Souls* just illuminates those connections and makes us appreciate them. And each other. I know it sounds cheesy, but it's the damn truth." ■

"While Souls has had a tremendous impact on the industry, the true effects are still a couple of years off"



This is an edited extract from You Died: The Dark Souls Companion, published by BackPage Press on April 15. Visit freightbooks.co.uk/you-died.html to preorder the book





A Dutch professor has spent five years and €1.25m seeking to answer a simple question: should Street Fighter be considered a martial art?

By Simon Parkin

Illustrations **Siku (from concepts by Chris Goto-Jones)**

A few years ago, during a drink-fuelled graduation ceremony at Leiden University, **Chris Goto-Jones**, a lecturer in comparative philosophy and political thought, asked a group of outgoing honours students to identify the single most important thing they had learned during their education. "I was somewhat hopeful that their answers might include references to great works of literature, exalted philosophical principles, or perhaps rigorous scientific methodologies," he says. It wasn't to be. Some students joked that they could barely remember what had happened during all those indistinguishable semesters, with their hedonistic nights and drowsy, morning-after lectures. One student drolly turned the question around, asking: "Professor, what do you think was the most important thing I learned?"

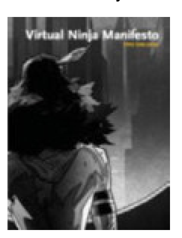
A little despondently, Goto-Jones returned his attention to the tinkling ceremony. Much later, a student, Donna, seemingly emboldened by alcohol, returned to her professor. "I've thought of the answer," she said. "The most important thing I learned during the last few years is that discipline makes us better people." Goto-Jones, somewhat relieved, asked her how she had come to learn the lesson. "I was anticipating perhaps at least a nod towards something that she'd encountered in her academic programme," he recalls. "Maybe the name of an inspirational Greek or German philosopher, a gesture towards a classic text." Instead, the student grinned and drunkenly replied: "I play a lot of *Street Fighter IV*. It's changed my life."

In the weeks that followed, Goto-Jones couldn't budge the student's reply from his mind. While he's both a martial-arts enthusiast and an avid player of videogames, including *Street Fighter IV* ("I would be willing to admit that the game has taught me some things, some of which I think are significant"), he couldn't quite believe that, for Donna, *Street Fighter* had proven more important, relevant and memorable than Kant's Third Critique or Plato's Republic. "*Street Fighter* had given her insights into how to live, ones that she hadn't seen in the texts of the various dead philosophers whose work filled her syllabus," he says. "This in itself, it seemed to me, was of quite monumental importance." ▶



Derren Brown

Chris Goto-Jones, professor of Comparative Philosophy & Political Thought, Leiden University



The first version of the Virtual Ninja Manifesto is available to download in PDF form from www.bit.ly/vninjapdf and in iOS-friendly format from www.bit.ly/vninjaios

Immediately Goto-Jones wanted to know whether Donna's experience was unique or, if not, whether she was part of a trend, or even a movement, whereby people were learning lessons in the virtual realm that were influencing how they went on to live outside of it. "I suspected, of course, that people today learn much more from videogames in general than they or their creators are aware of," Goto-Jones says. "But it was fascinating to imagine that we'd reached the point at which *Street Fighter* was more formative on people than Plato. If that was true, what was it about the game that appealed so much more than these traditional sources?" This begged a further question: was the way in which *Street Fighter* had taught Donna the value of discipline limited to Capcom's game? Or do other fighting games, and genres beyond, also fulfil the same function?

Goto-Jones, a graduate of Oxford, Cambridge and Keio universities, and a professorial research associate at the Japan Research Centre at London University, already had a natural interest in the relationship between martial arts and psychology. His teaching grades in both Shotokan karate and Wing Chun gave him first-hand experience of the transformative effects that physical martial arts can have on a human being. It seemed plausible that the journey to master a competitive fighting game, particularly one that draws such heavy influence from real-world martial arts (albeit then exaggerated with mystical fireballs and physics-shanking acrobatics) might provide similar effects.

"THE PLAYER PERFORMS MOTIONS THAT CAUSE AVATARS TO PERFORM THE MOTION-CAPTURED MOVEMENTS, ONES THAT ORIGINATED IN DISCIPLINED PHYSICAL BODIES"

The fear, however, was that it was all just romantic fantasy, a story that Donna had told herself to justify the hours spent on a videogame developing skills with no practical application outside of the game's reality and one that, as a videogame fan, Goto-Jones had chosen to believe. But surely it wasn't, he reasoned, such an absurd leap of logic? Both martial arts and *Street Fighter* require constant practice in order to perfect complex combat techniques. "Then there's something magical about the relationship between the animation of avatars and the locomotive skill and conditioned dexterity needed to manipulate the avatars," he says. "The player performs motions that cause avatars to perform the motion-captured movements, ones that originated in disciplined physical bodies." It is, as he puts it, all rather poetic.

"Mostly, I wanted to know whether Donna was really a different person because of her particularly disciplined engagement with *Street Fighter*, and in what ways that different person could be seen as 'better' than the previous Donna," he says. "What did her training regime look like? With what kind of intentionality did she approach her training? Did other players recognise her approach or any of its alleged outcomes? Could mastering *Street Fighter* transform a human being into a wiser, more ethical, more generally competent person?" Could the game truly fit within the long tradition of martial philosophy in East Asia?"

For most people, such questions would remain theoretical and hypothetical. Goto-Jones, however, decided to formalise a study. He came up with a name – The Virtual Ninja Project – and applied to The Netherlands Organisation For Scientific Research, which funds high-risk, innovative research projects that have the potential to make social impact, for a grant. "The project idea combined a variety of timely issues," says Goto-Jones. "Everything from the impact of digital media at a time of crisis in the university system, to the impact of the global spread of techno-culture from Japan, to the potential significance of so-called 'non-western' philosophical systems on contemporary European societies." Goto-Jones' hunch that there was a meaningful area of study here proved correct. He was awarded a €1.25m grant – in part to interrogate the question of whether or not *Street Fighter* could be classed a martial art in the orthodox definition. "By focusing on the self-transformative potential of Japanese fighting games, rooted in theoretical models drawn from the bushido tradition, this project managed to hit a lot of buttons at the same time."

Many of the martial artists Goto-Jones interviewed at the start of the project conceded that both disciplines demand the repetition of physical movements to the point of sublimation. But most were sceptical of any further similarities. "For one, there's a complete absence of actual physical danger in *Street Fighter*," Goto-Jones says. "When Chun-Li is destroyed by Ken, for example, her player isn't left bleeding on the floor." The martial artists would argue the absence of danger and stress in playing fighting games creates a vast point of difference to the psychology and practice of physical martial arts.

"It's worth remembering, however, that few physical martial arts actually place fighters in much physical danger in the modern period," Goto-Jones says. "The majority are now sports, with light contact and heavy safety pads; the goal isn't to kill your opponent but to touch them at specific points. It's not obvious that the psychological stakes are any lower in a *Street Fighter* competition than in a Taekwondo competition, especially when everyone involved has trained so hard and invested so much of their identity in the practice." Some martial artists even saw Goto-Jones' argument as a damning indictment of the state of the modern martial ▶


二十
(ni-jū)
ラーメン



arts. "If they're really so sanitised, perhaps they've lost all their meaning and power today?"

One difference that's less easy to dismiss is the disparity between the purely physical stresses that fighting videogames and martial arts make on their practitioners. "*Street Fighter* isn't nearly as physically demanding as snake-style kung fu," Goto-Jones says. "You hardly ever sweat playing games. So the question becomes whether or not the sublimation of precise thumb and finger movements can be as significant in both psychological and physical terms as the sublimation of the movements of larger limbs, such as arms and legs."

Undeniable, however, is the fact that once mastery of the physical aspect has been achieved, both fighting games and earnest fighting become contests of the mind. To find out where the similarities lay, Goto-Jones began by exploring the philosophical traditions of Buddhism, especially Zen, and their relationship with the transformative potentials of disciplined actions. He re-translated the classics of the bushido tradition in Japan to try to understand how the legendary warrior monks conceptualised the meaning and significance of martial training and combat. Then he performed a great deal of field work, travelling to Osaka and Tokyo, New York and London, multiple times each year to interview players in arcades to find out whether or not they believed in his hypothesis or whether "they thought it was completely stupid".

While Goto-Jones interviewed hundreds of players and martial artists (in part via a survey conducted with **Edge** readers in 2010), sceptics might question how able respondents were to give answers that were meaningfully true. For example, a player may believe that they're learning discipline and other valuable lessons from videogames, but testing whether or not those lessons are consequential outside of the context of the game is highly difficult. It's a problem, in fact, that's not limited to videogame players. "The problem of verifiability is common to nearly all claims of self-transformation," Goto-Jones says. "Certainly our project doesn't conclude that *Street Fighter* will make you a better person – only that it seems plausible that gamers can engage with the game in such a way that aims towards that outcome, one rationalised by and consistent with a 500-year-old philosophical tradition.

"We can also show that neurological changes can and do occur in gamers, and that gamers with contemplative or meditative approaches to gaming achieve different changes than those who simply play for fun or competition." Goto-Jones has even loftier hopes for the results of his research that relate to his love of and, in his words, advocacy for the medium. "It's one thing to say that games don't necessarily make people violent, but it's quite another to say that playing a specific variety of games brings about an ethical self-transformation of a player that makes them into a better person," he says.

Five years after it began, Goto-Jones' work is almost complete. The three PhD dissertations that formed part of the funding's deliverables are written. Goto-Jones' findings will be published later this year in a book titled The Virtual Ninja Manifesto (published by Rowman & Littlefield) and, perhaps most fittingly, the university is hosting the Virtual Ninja Tournament, an invitational *Street Fighter V* competition, in The Hague in the summer. For Goto-Jones, the result of five years of study has been to accept that the videogame medium might have the capacity to replace the spiritual and philosophical function of disciplined pursuits like the martial arts. If that claim seems outlandish, just wait for the combo finisher. "We might have found a way to make *Street Fighter* into a politically radical and ethically responsible social movement," he says.

Goto-Jones' work has been rigorous, and his pedigree as an academic and researcher is unimpeachable. For anyone who has lost a summer holiday to committing the shoryuken motion to muscle memory, or who has learned to gracefully accept a defeat at the arcade as a necessary step in the lifelong journey of self-improvement, at least some of his study's claims will resonate. While some will remain sceptical, anyone who's felt the impact of time spent in a videogame's reality can at least surely back Goto-Jones' admirable aim to find out whether games can have positive effects on the human mind, and the way in which we view the world and our place in it. "As videogames become increasingly pervasive, I hope this work signals the possibility that we should be able to reflect on our play in more philosophically sophisticated ways," he explains. "Just as we're all open to the possibility that reading a great novel will make us into different, perhaps even better, people, we should be able to reflect critically on the ways in which games can be transformative because of their nature."

Perhaps, in the end, the motivation for all this work wasn't in proving a grand philosophical theorem, but rather in giving a student his support. "Ultimately, I hope we find a way to show that Donna wasn't fooling herself when she said that *Street Fighter* changed her life and made her into a better person." ■

"GAMERS WITH CONTEMPLATIVE OR MEDITATIVE APPROACHES TO GAMING ACHIEVE DIFFERENT CHANGES THAN THOSE WHO PLAY FOR FUN OR COMPETITION"

STRESS TEST

While there's no threat of physical injury to players of fighting videogames (beyond a bit of RSI in an over-eager thumb, perhaps), Goto-Jones believes the stress that participants undergo when entering tournaments, or even lower-level matches, is comparable to that of competing martial artists.

"It's arguable to me that the key determinant of stress is the stakes involved," he says. For Goto-Jones, the basic catalyst for stress is directly linked to our "intentionality" and our sense of the importance and significance of the outcome. In terms of the pressure and strain that players of fighting games undergo, at least, *Street Fighter* and martial arts are comparable.

THE MAKING OF...



ELITE DANGEROUS

How a plucky British studio enlisted players to help create a game on a galactic scale

Format PC, Xbox One
Developer/publisher Frontier Developments
Origin UK
Release 2014

While celebrated astrophysicist and cosmologist Carl Sagan was working on science-fiction novel Contact in 1983, he documented an idea for how the story might be turned into a videogame. The project's themes would deal with the development and preservation of galactic civilisations, but at its core would be a realistic representation of the nearest few thousand stars that would teach players about astronomy in a "context as exciting as most violent videogames".

Sagan couldn't know it, but at the time he was documenting these hopes, **David Braben** and Ian Bell already had a playable build of an ambitious space trading game called *Elite*. It launched the next year and, while it featured eight fictional procedurally generated galaxies each populated with 256 stars, it could hardly have been more inspiring to potential stargazers, scientists and explorers. It was also the first step on a three-decade long journey towards *Elite Dangerous*, the most recent game in the series and the first full realisation of Braben, Bell – and, indeed, Sagan's – early ambitions, featuring around 160,000 real star systems at the centre of a galaxy containing 400 billion procedurally generated celestial conglomerations.

"A lot of [the original *Elite*] was in the imagination," Frontier Developments CEO **David Braben** tells us. "And what [*Dangerous*] enables you to do is take your imagination that much further. You can feel just how big planets are, and also how tiny we are at this scale. For me, it matters a lot that it's real. I know to a lot of people it's just a backdrop to the game, but to me it's magical that on a clear night I can look up into the sky and see things that I've seen in the game, and vice versa. One day humanity might have moved into the stars, and the constellations they see from other stars will already have been named by people who played *Elite Dangerous*. Which is lovely."

But a game of such inhuman scale, even with workload-easing procedural generation, is no small endeavour. Nor is it a sure bet, as Braben was keenly aware while speaking to publishers about the possibility of funding a new addition to a series that was last updated in 1995 with the shaky launch of *Frontier: First Encounters*.

"Making *Elite Dangerous* had been in the back of my mind for a *really* long time," Braben explains. "Every week, if not every day, I was



***Horizons*' planetary landings are limited to airless worlds for the time being, but that's set to change in the future**

getting mail saying, 'You must make this.' The desire was there. But in a publisher world, I just know how easy it is to get derailed with these things. One of the things that typically happens is a publisher looks at other games that are similar and tries to make your game more like that. There's an ethos that you only try to vary

"YOU CAN FEEL JUST HOW BIG PLANETS ARE, AND ALSO HOW TINY WE ARE. FOR ME, IT MATTERS A LOT THAT IT'S REAL"

one thing. So if you want to push one aspect of a game, you take something that's quite like another game, and you change that one aspect, because that gives them some idea of who it's going to sell to, how well it's going to sell, and what the shape of the sales will be."

It's an understandably cautious, if artistically neutering, approach, but one that runs counter to Braben's own experience. "We've been involved in quite a few game releases where the profile of the sales have been very different to what the publishers might've expected," he continues. "*Dog's Life* had a slow build but huge interest, and actually sold out. It was something that caught people on the hop, and publishers don't like to be caught on the hop. With *Elite Dangerous*, I knew full well in the back of mind what would happen."

Braben felt, at least among the publishers he spoke to, the general consensus was that the genre had had its time – a position that's difficult to square with the buzz that surrounds high-profile space exploration games such as *Elite Dangerous*, *Star Citizen* and *No Man's Sky* today. While Braben agreed the genre was in need of a significant update, he had other ideas about how that should be done.

"It was this concept that to market it you'd need a focus, a character and a story," he says. "And that's why I think *Mass Effect* ended up the way it did. I don't know the guys who made it all that well, but it wouldn't surprise me if it started in someone's mind as an *Elite*-like game, and then they added some story, and the story took control of it. I've seen that happen with other games in other genres, where you end up with something that… you have to constrain the game world. *Mass Effect*'s a great game, but it's not the kind of game I personally wanted to be part of making. And my fear was it would be driven down that route and people would say, 'Oh, it's just a ripoff of *Mass Effect*' [laughs]."

Behind the scenes, the studio had been committing what resources it could to skunk works projects that explored concepts and potential mechanics, along with the background story that would outline the political machinations of the ruling powers within *Dangerous*'s galaxy. But it wasn't until Kickstarter came along, and specifically *Broken Age* (at the time known as *Double Fine Adventure*) that Braben saw an opportunity to get the project off of the ground. "I remember seeing that game and thinking, 'Oh, that's fantastic,'" he says. "I wanted to do a Kickstarter there and then but unfortunately there was an issue in that the site was US-only. So we found out when Kickstarter was coming to the UK and got ready – we ended up launching it only a few days after."

While the advantages of crowdfunding were obvious, the concept was new to games and there was a steep learning curve associated with managing a campaign, and sating an army of voracious – and vociferous – benefactors. "We had some internal tech tests and obviously had the Cobra engine, which gave us a hell of a headstart – it was already 64bit at that point so it was perfect for *Elite*," Braben explains. "The problem was that people expect new videos to go up every day, and not just talking heads; I mean content that doesn't take a day to prepare. Some things you can, especially ▶

if you're using fast-and-dirty prototyping techniques, and we did all sorts of things quickly and showed them. That was very useful, because it doesn't half help marshall your thoughts."

Once launched, the Kickstarter campaign quickly gained momentum, initially thundering towards its £1.25 million target. Donations tailed off towards the end, but things picked up again and the total eventually soared to more than £1.5 million. But Braben's belief in the project never wavered. "I was confident all the way through, and people criticised me for it internally," he reflects. "But I think one of the things we've done at Frontier for a very long time is forecast our own games internally in terms of understanding who's going to buy and when they're going to buy. We saw it when we put [*Elite Dangerous*] season one on sale, and also with other games like *LostWinds*: you get a spike at the start of the sale period and then another at the end. We didn't understand some of it, but the thing I'm really glad we did is set a realistic target. We genuinely wouldn't have done it had it not reached that target. The Kickstarters that have had problems are the ones that set a limit of, say, £10,000. The nightmare scenario is it goes to £10,000.01 and then you have to deliver the game."

Kickstarter wasn't the only funding source – a fundraising drive on Frontier's website raised more, and there was external investment to go with Frontier's own resources – but it served as an encouraging, and non-anecdotal, measure of players' interest in a new *Elite* game. But with the market's existence proven, actually developing the game posed its own set of challenges. How do you go about managing a project of such scope? "Well, one of the advantages we've got is we've been around a long time by industry standards," Braben says. So most of the problems we encountered [making *Elite Dangerous*] we had already encountered in a slightly different guise before. And interestingly, moving away from publishers means you find out if you have the discipline and the processes internally that put in place the checks and balances a publisher would."

LostWinds, though significantly smaller, served as an evaluation of those systems, and *Kinect Disneyland Adventures* – whose dev team swelled to nearly 400 – proved that the more-than-100-strong *Dangerous* team was feasible. "It's a real discipline, and because we've had a lot of people who've worked together for a long time, we've got a lot of internal tools and processes we can use to track things," Braben says. "That sounds very regimented, but actually it gives you an awful lot of freedom, because without a publisher you still know what the requirements are, but you can be very flexible within that.

"There was a lot of discussion prior to and during the Kickstarter project as to whether you should be able to walk around in your ship. We looked at that in *great* detail. Ultimately we decided the arbiter has to be, 'Does it make the

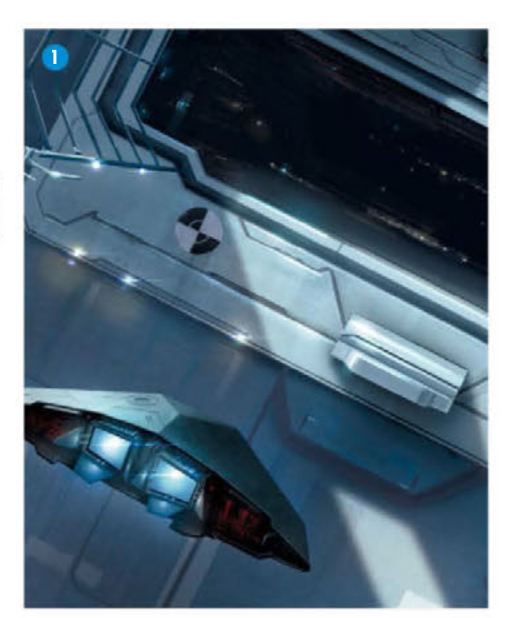
Q&A

David Braben
Founder and CEO, Frontier Developments

Where does *Elite Dangerous: Arena* fit into your plans?
It gives players a very approachable experience of *Elite*. *Arena* got a life of its own because it feels like a different, but very rewarding, experience that gives you a skillset that's transferable to the [main] game. But essentially it's something you might want to just play a session of in the evening instead of playing another multiplayer game.

What sort of surprises came out of the alpha and beta releases?
One of the reasons they were so useful is we got really good statistics and coping mechanisms for [poor connections]. It was better than I thought it was going to be, because we'd done tests internally with people taking machines home. I remember one problem that came up during the Kickstarter campaign was people would upgrade their computer and their network connections, but quite often there will be a £10 hub sitting under their TV like a glorified extension board, which is how people regard them. But they're not because they're processing the data and, more importantly, they're gatekeepers that don't let certain things through.

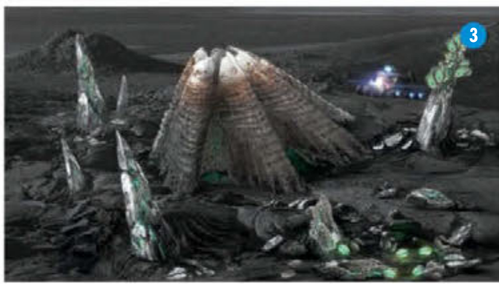
Did adding planetary landings present any problems you weren't expecting?
We knew technically there was so much work behind that to get it to work well, particularly in a multiplayer world. The problem is when you think about how many stupid number of polygons there are on a planet's surface – just how physically big it is. Given that we've got environments that are much bigger than the surface of the Earth, that makes for horrendous draw distances. And you've got to make sure the tech can cope with that. I don't mean just the draw distances out to the sun or other stars in the galaxy, I mean even just draw distances across a human scale – to the next mountain.













❶ The spectacular scale of the major stations that orbit planets and stars becomes clear on docking approach.
❷ *Elite Dangerous*'s epic space battles are thrilling events, which can influence the balance of power within contested areas of the galaxy.
❸ Recently discovered on Merope 5C, these imposing space barnacles are the first example of alien life in *Dangerous*.
❹ The perilously glassy cockpit of Lakon Spaceway's Type-7 Transporter. Frontier plans to implement explorable ship interiors and spacewalks in time.
❺ Though a military ship, the Imperial Cutter boasts a colossal cargo bay.
❻ The SRV cockpit functions similarly to the ones you'll find in *Dangerous*'s spacecraft, so acclimatisation once on the ground is a simple matter.
❼ Skimmers carry explosives to their target, making it best to avoid them

game more fun?' Because it's a lot of extra work and it brings in more constraints. It's something we *will* do, but it'll be in a future update because we need so many things on a human scale for that to be additive and enjoyable."

Another point of contention was the intersection between scientific accuracy and player-focused artistry. The team initially intended for space to be a realistically silent vacuum, but that proved problematic. "David was keen on us doing that because he wanted to stick with our scientific principles," recalls Frontier head of audio **Jim Croft**. "We tried it and implemented a version and it was boring as hell [laughs]. There was no sense of motion through space and you didn't feel connected to your ship. So we started again. We thought about the sci-fi stuff we love and have been informed by over the years: Ben Burtt [Star Wars, Indiana Jones, WALL-E], who did the pod racers, and the bikes in *Tron*. We had all those things in mind, and we wanted to bring some of that sexiness into it and have a go at doing something really different and interesting."

Lead sound designer Joe Hogan concocted a recipe for the Sidewinder's engines and, once refined, that template was handed out so other designers could work on the different ship manufacturers to ensure the craft had different qualities (see 'Sound craft'). "For us, the ship's the player in *Elite Dangerous*," Croft explains. "You're flying most of the time through the blackness of space and you really want your character – the ship – to experience things like speed, acceleration and mass motion in different ways. We just found we'd hit on something really core to what the enjoyable experience of *Elite* is. And that's quite unusual for a game – I've worked on a lot of games and sound is very important, but *Elite* is a very special vehicle for audio."

At the end of 2015, Frontier launched *Horizons* – a second season for the ongoing *Dangerous* project – initially introducing planetary landings and Surface Recon Vehicles. It represents an opportunity to continue development. "It's amazing," Braben says. "No game is ever complete or perfect; there are always more things you want to do on it. There's an amazing story about Turner sneaking into the Royal Society at night to add something to a painting he'd been itching to alter. With the original *Elite* there were things we wanted to do and we were constrained by both time and memory. So to be able to continuously update something is what I've always wanted – it's a wonderful opportunity.

"Overall, there are a lot of things I feel we're getting better at, but we're still not there. Having a mission structure that works for everybody across such a giant galaxy, for example – we're improving it in stages, and it's getting better and better. And let's face it, we got the learning curve side of things wrong – it was just too difficult."

Along with finessing mission structure and adding tutorials, Frontier's most recent *Elite*-related project, *Elite Dangerous: Arena*, attempts to help address that issue by parcelling up the moreish combat mechanics into a standalone, accessible CQC multiplayer game to function as a stepping stone to the full game's greater complexity.

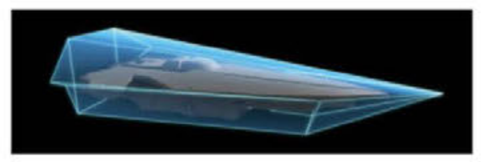
With each addition, *Elite Dangerous* grows in scope, and it's clear Braben relishes the chance to indulge his ambitions. But even in a position of proven success, it's no less nerve-wracking to hand your passion project over to players. "The game is building and improving, and doing it in the public eye is very interesting because it concentrates the mind," he admits. "The Internet can be a cruel place, but there a lot of good, well-meaning people out there who want to make sure that we do make it better. Some of [those requests] are quite big asks, but we respond to most of them as best we can. *Elite Dangerous* has never been better, but letting go of a game is sort of like sending your child off to school and they get beaten up in the playground. You want to give them a baseball bat." ■

SOUND CRAFT

We praised *Elite*'s audio design in our review and in 2015's **Edge** Awards, but it's the ships engines that really stick in the mind. "They're all very different," Croft says. "Some of them have very organic qualities and sources, and for other ones we used synths a lot. It's a mixture of various things. For example, with the bigger ships like the Type-9s and the Asp, there's some old seaplane in there to give them that growl. Most of the ships have a mechanical base, but it's about creating lots of layers and bringing those in and out at different times. We mix it on the fly, so if you accelerate, I'll be suppressing one layer and bringing in another one. There's also a lot of realtime processing – we use telemetry from the game to change the EQ for how much high or low pass is on a sound, and we'll also be changing the pitch, the volume and blending live effects like tremolo and guitar effects to give you a sense of changing motions."













1 Various shield arrangements for the imposing Anaconda ship.
2 SRVs and planetary landings are the first part of *Horizons*' full season of updates to the game.
3 Concept images of cargo canisters – which illustrate why you'll need plenty of hold room if you want to make a career out of trading.
4 Ship manufacturer Gutamaya specialises in military ships, but has a flair for luxury interiors.
5 A view of the combat-oriented Fer-De-Lance's thrusters



STUDIO PROFILE

TECHLAND

From pirate to publisher: the Dying Light maker reflects on 25 years in the game

By Ben Griffin

The development of *Dying Light* hit a brick wall in 2013. Several, in fact – the game's parkour system, which hinged on level designers creating each scalable structure with a marker, was laborious. And it wasn't until the team had placed its 50,000th marker that a better solution was found: frustrated, programmer Bartosz Kulon came in one weekend and performed some technical wizardry that allowed the climbing of anything in the world, marker-free.

After *Dead Island*'s patchiness – the progress-halting bugs, the AI freezes, the constant whiff of a studio struggling to punch above its weight – the studio suddenly had an unimpeded path to success. It was a much-needed breakthrough; despite *Dead Island*'s monstrous commercial success – five million copies were sold in its first three years on the shelves – and the subsequent growth of the studio, the game's reception hit the team hard.

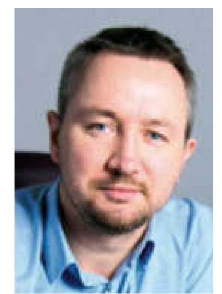
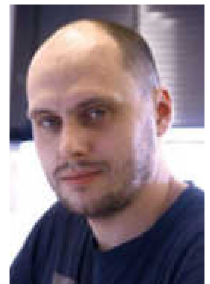
"[We got] the feeling we weren't a respected studio," Techland producer **Tymon Smektała** tells us. "*Dead Island* was a game created by an unknown studio from Poland and was one of the best sellers of its year, but because people didn't know who we were, they focused on all of the things that we did wrong. We didn't know how to communicate with people to explain who we are and what we're trying to achieve."

It would be another five years until the release of *Dead Island*'s blood relative, open-world zombie survival game *Dying Light*. And the public's dim view of the studio initially persisted.

"A lot of people were quite negative towards Techland," says **Paul Milewski**, the studio's head of PR and marketing. "They had a set opinion and they wouldn't budge on that. The success of *Dying Light* and the playability of the game helped prove them wrong, but then our post-release support swayed a lot more people. All of sudden you had players saying, 'You guys actually don't treat us like a pay cheque.'"

Smektała believes that Techland has become much more adept at cultivating its fanbase. "Giving stuff away for free is one way to foster that, but it's also important to us to have that communication because we want people to understand that we're good people making games and doing our best."

That spirit is exemplified by Kulon's voluntary weekend tinkering, a sense of loyalty helped along by the inherent fun of specialising in games about zombie dismemberment. On tables lay limp silicon appendages, and all manner

FROM LEFT **CEO Paweł Marchewka and game director Adrian Ciszewski have been at Techland for 30 years combined**

of melee weapons, including baseball bats, sledgehammers and golf clubs, stand propped up in corners. To record the sounds of broken bones, Techland's audio designer entered his one-man booth and spent all day focused on the grisly task of breaking shin bones, procured from the local butcher, in a vice. And for the sound of vehicular crashes several employees visited a nearby scrapyard and asked the owner to drop cars from a crane. He happily obliged.



Founded 1991
Employees 300
Key staff Paweł Marchewka (CEO), Adrian Ciszewski (game director)
URL www.techland.pl
Selected softography *Speedway Manager, Crime Cities, Call Of Juarez, Dead Island, Dying Light*
Current projects *Dying Light*

made the activity entirely legal. "I needed some money because I was in secondary school, so I went to a shop and said, 'Hey, I'm selling games for Commodore Amiga – might you be interested?' That's how I started. Then I went to another two or three shops in my town… The opportunity was very obvious."

Marchewka hired staff and secured office space in Wrocław's centre, graduating from travelling game salesman to company head. Techland was born, but trouble was coming.

Intellectual property rights emerged and Techland found itself under threat. "They announced that within two years there would be copyright laws in place," Marchewka says.

"IT WAS ONE OF THE BEST SELLERS OF ITS YEAR, BUT PEOPLE FOCUSED ON ALL THE THINGS THAT WE DID WRONG"

One playtester recalls a run-in with the law when he was picking up his girlfriend from the airport. Noticing him parked in the wrong bay, a policeman tapped on his window and asked him to open his car's boot. Looking inside, the officer immediately reached for his sidearm. The developer had forgotten that his car was loaded with knives and katanas. Fortunately, there were no body parts to go with them.

You get the impression that this hardy Polish studio could withstand an actual undead apocalypse, too. "We really support each other and we really care about what we do," Smektała says. "If someone has problems achieving what they need to achieve, there'll always be someone willing to help him."

But this familial team all started with one person. As a teenager, CEO **Paweł Marchewka** would visit Sunday markets in Wrocław to buy Amiga games on floppy disk, which he would then duplicate and sell himself. Polish copyright laws – or, more accurately, the lack of them –

"We were delivering to 30 or 40 shops, so we said to everyone, 'Don't worry, we'll replace all our products with freeware and public domain games six months before [the laws come in]'."

The company had also begun importing games from the UK, buying their licences, then translating them into Polish and distributing them. Techland was safe for now, but operating on a business model that cost ten times more than the previous one. So in 1994 Marchewka decided to cut out the middle man and turn Techland into a fully fledged game development studio.

It was quite a leap. "[The change] was difficult," Marchewka recalls. "Nobody really knew how to make games."

Ignoring this trifling issue, the studio pressed on, improving with each release. By 2000, with the release of the Blade Runner-inspired *Crime Cities*, the studio was confident it had made the right decision. "We caught up to the market," Marchewka says. "We were 30 people then, and it was quite an advanced game."

Despite this progress, Techland's most ▶





ABOVE **In one of Techland's larger spaces there's a team of ten working on VR projects.** LEFT **One of the rare examples of a conservative working area. Disembodied rubber limbs, moulting Christmas trees and 1:1 cardboard zombie cutouts are just out of shot**

lucrative release at the time wasn't a game at all, but a language-translation tool. Profits from those sales allowed the team to concentrate on its passions, leading to games such as *Chrome* (2003), *Xpand Rally* (2004), *Call Of Juarez* (2006) and *Nail'd* (2010). Meanwhile, Techland also kept up its publishing arm, putting out *Sniper Elite V2*, *Payday 2* and *The Walking Dead* in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Techland's somewhat premature birth into the world of blockbusters came in 2010, when the hype generated by Axis Animation's moving *Dead Island* trailer clattered into the reality of what was a poorly optimised game. Despite *Dead Island*'s tremendous sales, creative differences with publisher Deep Silver – which owned the IP – prompted Techland to cut ties and team up with Warner Bros. Thanks to the negotiation of better terms, *Dying Light* generated much more revenue for the company, despite shifting similar numbers.

Today the studio is twice the size it was when making *Dead Island*, and siginificantly more credible in the eyes of both consumers and critics. Those additional resources, and the increased appeal, have placed Techland in an ideal position to develop young talent – and the studio's already benefitting from that relationship. "A bunch of university students came in for a month and we were like, 'Well, what do you guys want to try to do?'" Milewski says. "They basically replicated *Don't Starve* in *Dying Light*. Now we're going to release it after *The Following*, so we have time to do justice to what these, essentially, kids put together for us."

The studio also hosts game jams which, as well as fostering the creative spirit within the studio, provide a good way to meet potential employees and absorb new ideas. Game director **Adrian Ciszewski** compares it to Ubisoft's internal experiments, which gave rise to games such as *Grow Home*. "We're doing [something similar], but only on paper right now," he says. "We're designing a lot of different things. Sometimes they're just small games; sometimes they're big, big ideas."

Techland now has studios in Warsaw and Vancouver, and a finance hub in Ostrów. Its main premises in Wrocław sport several chillout areas designed to inspire creativity (each also referred to as a confessional, suggesting an absolution of past game development sins), and inspirational quotes from the likes of Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs adorn the walls alongside others from employees ('This evening I'm going to be incapacitated', reads one example).

The studio's new-found success comes at a cost, however, and some longer-serving staffers rue the loss of the community spirit that defined its early years. "It used to be one floor in the city centre, and it was like 50 people, and we all knew each other," says Ciszewski, now in his 12th year at Techland. "It was a family. Now it's hundreds of people, and it's really hard to know everyone's name, everyone's face."

An inevitable result of the additional manpower required to produce a game such as *Dying Light*, perhaps, but a price most seem willing to pay. And while the operation is considerably larger these days, it's far from a faceless corporation. Ciszewski, Smektała, Marchewka and Milewski all use the word 'family' to describe the team.

Techland is one of the industry's strangest success stories, then, growing from a one-man disk-copying operation to a world-renowned developer. And while the studio initially experimented with genres in the same way it did business models – dabbling in arcadey quadbike racers, western firstperson shooters and even the world of colourful 3D platformers – it seems to have found its calling in the land of the undead. *Dead Island* and *Dying Light* have given the company some breathing room to focus on hiring additional talent, building goodwill with fans, and developing new ideas.

So what's next? Everyone we talk to has a slightly different view, but they all share the same unchecked enthusiasm and ambition that has driven the company from the start. "We have three studios, so maybe we'll create three games," Ciszewski offers. "That's doable in our current position but, still, it's 99 per cent [certain] we'll stick with zombies."

Smektała? "We might not have the resources of other high-profile studios but we're getting there. So people should wait for our next game with crossed fingers and huge expectations."

And finally CEO Marchewka: "In general, I think open-world games, mainly in firstperson, will be our main direction for the next five years at least. I can't see a reason to change it."

Given the studio's experience and now robust tech, that makes sense. But if there's one thing Techland has proven, it's that it's perfectly prepared – and able – to adapt. ■

"OPEN VIRTUAL-WORLD GAMES, MAINLY IN FIRSTPERSON, WILL BE OUR MAIN DIRECTION FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS"



1 Techland's profile grew massively after 2006's western-themed shooter *Call Of Juarez.* 2 *Dead Island* mixed the exotic with the horrific: flimsily attired women disintegrated upon each melee strike. 3 The parkour-infused *Dying Light* expanded on *Dead Island*'s crafting mechanic

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Puzzles & Dragons iOS
Two years of daily logins later and we're finally approaching *P&D*'s endgame, but what is it, exactly? Such is the pace of change in *P&D*'s native Japan, where a host of competitors have left development studio GungHo struggling to keep on top, that the meta is constantly shifting. Building an endgame team will take us months – by which point it may well be outdated. But of course we'll do it anyway.

Destiny PS4
Were we too effusive in our praise for *The Taken King*? Because it's been downhill ever since. The new nadir is Crimson Doubles, a week-long 2v2 gametype that's so uninspired, and its drop rate so stingy, that teams are throwing themselves off the nearest ledge to hurry things along to the next dice roll. Bungie president Harold Ryan has quit, *Destiny 2*'s apparently been put back, and, finally, after an exceptional 18 months, the spell has been broken.

Rainbow 6 Siege PS4
Even *Siege*'s tense, slow-moving sweeps and controlled bursts of fire feel like a wave of catharsis in between prolonged *The Witness* endgame sessions. A new map set on a frozen yacht, along with a couple of new operators, has freshened up the playlist, while a ridiculous bug that saw character models slide around the map in a textureless T-pose – making enemy movements inscrutable – has been patched.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

All change

A few years ago, readers of the Consumerist website voted EA the worst company in America for two years running. That it beat the likes of Halliburton, Bank Of America and ExxonMobil was, admittedly, more to do with the ability of large Internet communities to mobilise than the company's wrongdoings. Yes, it had botched *Mass Effect*'s ending, but it hadn't committed mortgage fraud or caused the biggest oil spill of all time.

But EA took the hint, and promised to do better. And to its credit, it *has* changed, though change is relative. The company seems to have decided the most effective way to change your image is to do something other people do, but which you don't. And so we have *Unravel* (p108), a quirkily charming, side-scrolling, physics-driven puzzle-platformer made by a small studio in Sweden. Unique? Not exactly, no. But it is to EA, which, of course, is precisely the point.



Ubisoft is at it too, though rather than snap up projects from elsewhere it has chosen to use its increasingly well-worn brand names in different ways. Not *too* different, of course. *Far Cry Primal* (p102) moves from the present day to prehistory and replaces a camera's zoom lens with a tactical owl. And *Assassin's Creed Chronicles* (p110) remixes a 3D action adventure into a 2D stealth game that owes a debt to *Mark Of The Ninja* and *Prince Of Persia*.

Hardly heart-stopping stuff, but EA and Ubisoft are trying – and at least they've done their research. With *Street Fighter V* (p98) Capcom has supposedly built a live game, one to be updated with extra things to do in the months and years after release. Sadly, no one at Capcom has realised you're meant to do that with new content, rather than stuff you've yanked out of the launch-day package. Luckily, Consumerist doesn't poll readers on the worst company in Japan.

Street Fighter V

Yoshinori Ono spent a tremendous amount of our interview for **E**289's cover story talking about football. With *Street Fighter V*, he said, it was as if Capcom was providing us with a ball, kit, two goals and a pitch – all players of any skill level need to get started. At the time, it felt like a fair point. Now, we realise he was missing out on a vital ingredient: a coach.

Street Fighter V offers almost nothing to the beginner player. Its tutorial sits somewhere between an insult and a bad joke, walking you through movement, the three strengths of attack, throws, then Ryu's V-Skill and V-Trigger. That's your lot. OK, you've parried a Ken fireball using Ryu's Mind's Eye V-Skill, but what of the V-Skills that are unique to each of the other 15 warriors available at launch? Ken's is a nippy forward run, Chun-Li's a quick angled jump, Cammy's a spinning backfist, and Birdie either eats a doughnut, throws a banana skin on the floor or rolls a can along the ground. You've activated Ryu's V-Trigger by pressing both heavy attack buttons together, but what does it do? And what do all the other characters' equivalents do? Capcom, bizarrely, is in no mood for sharing. The V (short for Variable) system is *SFV*'s greatest trick, stripping away the system-wide mechanics of previous games and replacing them with things that make each character feel unique and can help turn a fight on its head. The least the game could do is tell you a little about them.

Actually, it turns out that the least the game can do is an awful lot less than that – for the single player anyway. With a *Mortal Kombat*-style cinematic story mode coming as a free update in June, the 'Story' entry on the launch game's main menu leads to a series of what Capcom rather apologetically calls 'character prologues' – a handful of single-round scraps against comically untesting AI opponents interspersed with voice-acted comic-book panels. They're over in a flash – some characters have as many as four fights, most three, some just two – and the lack of opposition means you can win the lot by thoughtlessly pressing buttons, learning little about a character beyond a couple of minutes of backstory, and nothing about how the game as a whole should be played.

Then there's Survival mode, which has some fine ideas but is shoddily implemented – a fair way of describing the game as a whole. Instead of the genre-standard health top-up after a victory, you can cash in some of your score for a Supplement – a perk, essentially, either restoring some health, boosting super meter or attack power or, in the case of the Double Down supplement, getting a score multiplier for your next fight in exchange for a debuff (half health, perhaps, or a full stun meter that means every hit makes you dizzy). While the AI's a slight step up from story mode, it's still terrible, and doesn't really start trying until level 26 of Normal difficulty's 30 levels. Supplements are randomised – you'll always get one per category, but it might not be the one you want. So Survival runs follow a similar pattern: you mindlessly batter your way to the last few fights, scrape through one of the tougher battles then get dealt a bad hand with the health refill, start the next fight with a sliver, lose, and wonder why you bother. Pretty soon, you just won't.

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS4 (version tested)
Release Out now

Elsewhere there's a local versus mode, and a training room. And for the time being, that's it. There's no classic arcade mode – fair enough, perhaps, in a game that launches on consoles with no arcade release, but it does put *SFV* in the unfathomable situation of offering no way to play a traditional best-of-three-rounds match against a CPU opponent.

> The singleplayer component doesn't take the wants and needs of the beginner player into the slightest consideration



Perhaps one will be added later on, though Capcom's hands are already full in that regard. At some point in March it will add combo challenges, one of several features absent from *SFV*'s launch that were on the *SFIV* disc way back in 2009. While punishingly difficult in places, combo trials were an invaluable learning tool in *Street Fighter IV*. OK, you might never land the harder challenges, but you get information from them either way – which attacks can follow each other in combos, which can be cancelled into special moves, or how to best set up a super move (here called Critical Art, or CA). There's nothing of the sort here, and Capcom's stated aim of making a fun, accessible fighting game is entirely undermined by a singleplayer component that doesn't take the wants and needs of the beginner player into the slightest consideration.

Also coming in March are eightplayer online lobbies, where you can spectate matches in progress while you wait your turn. The shop will open its doors too, selling Alex, the first of six DLC characters, and alternate character costumes (weirdly, completing story mode prologues unlocks new outfits that you can't actually buy yet). Capcom's roadmap for *Street Fighter V*'s first six months of life looks like the public development schedule of a game in Steam Early Access.

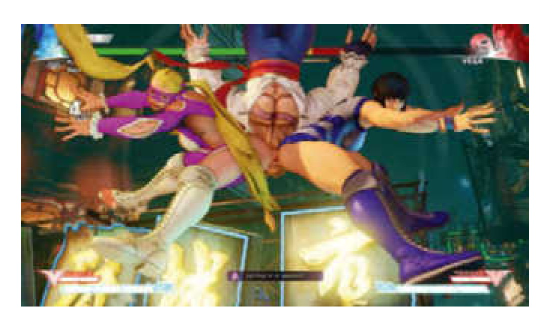
There's a very good reason for all this, at least: the Capcom Pro Tour season kicked off ten days after *SFV*'s launch, and Capcom simply had to get the game into competitive players' hands in time. Indeed, everything they need is here: a feature-rich training mode, plenty of online opposition, and one of the most thrilling, most deeply satisfying fighting games ever created.

And this, of course, is what matters most: *Street Fighter V* may be terribly structured, but at its core is a thoughtful reinvention of a genre that had become too complex for its own good. *SFIV*'s many little system exploits – the plinks and option selects, the four-button Focus escapes and invincible backdashes – have been removed. Combo timing windows have ▶



ABOVE With Zangief we've had to throw out 25 years of matchup knowledge and start again. Now more mobile, with frightening combo ability and able to piledriver you out of the air, fighting him requires an entirely new approach. **LEFT** The story mode's prologues show characters in the first set of alternate costumes that will be released when the in-game shop opens in March. At 40,000 Fight Money a pop, they're not cheap – DLC characters cost 100,000

BELOW Necalli may have a command throw, but he's no traditional grappler. He's *SFV*'s equivalent to *SFIV*'s Evil Ryu: fast, aggressive and blessed with terrifying damage output, especially during V-Trigger



ABOVE Rainbow Mika calls on her wrestling partner, Nadeshiko, for her Critical Art. She can also summon her on screen with her V-Trigger, her approach angle – from left, right or above – dictated by joystick direction



Ken is every bit as effective from distance as he is when he's in the opponent's face. His speedy forward dash, and new diagonally angled Hurricane Kick, mean he can anti-air opponents from surprising distances

been opened up considerably, with a three-frame input buffer bringing the fanciest, most damaging links within much easier reach of the less skilled. Even special-move commands have been simplified, with most now mapped to the quarter-circle motion.

Yet none of that means the game is now simple. What it may lack in technical complexity is more than made up for by the need to learn the intricacies of each character, since each is so different to the others. Even those who you think you know have some surprises: Zangief can combo into his Critical Art, or Spinning Piledriver you in the air. Dhalsim retains his keep-away stretchy limbs, but has also gained devastating combo potential. And Ryu and Ken are now two distinct characters with different playstyles, just as *Street Fighter* lore has always insisted they are.

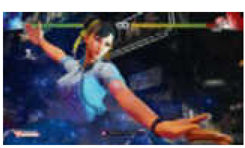
The result is that you need to learn at least the basics of each character in order to stand a chance at success online. You don't lose because you dropped a fancy 20-hit combo, but because you don't know the match-up well enough. After a loss in *Street Fighter IV*, we'd often head to training mode to drill our combo execution. Here, we're more likely to pick the character we've just lost to and spend a few minutes with their special moves and V-mechanics to better understand when, and how, to go in for the kill. The natural consequence of this is that, instead of picking a main character and sticking with them, you move around the cast, and have a reasonable handle on them all, finding new favourites where you'd least expected to.

That is precisely how Capcom wants it – and one of the rare areas in which it has appropriately structured the muddled framework it has built around the game. Post-release characters and costumes will be bought with Fight Money (FM), the in-game currency that's accrued with ranked match wins and as you level up. Each character has their own levelling path, and each rank-up nets you 1,000 FM. An online win nets you just 50. The maths is pretty clear, then – a few wins ranking up with a different character is a speedier process than winning another 20 with your current main. And variety isn't just good for the wallet – it makes for a more enjoyable game, too.

When it works, anyway. Despite four public beta tests, a spotty launch saw us kicked even from singleplayer game modes if the server connection dropped, while online play was either serviceable or unplayable. All kinks that will be ironed out over time, no doubt, but it simply reinforces the feeling that *Street Fighter V* was not quite ready for prime time.

The result, then, is something of a muddle. *SFV*, at its core, feels peerless. Capcom set out to strip away a lot of the overly complex nonsense and make a game players of all skill levels could play and enjoy, and on that promise it has delivered. Its launch roster of 16 characters is slender by modern standards, yet its cast offers such remarkable diversity that it doesn't matter. Mechanically, it's fantastic. Structurally, it's a mess and a missed opportunity, designed in direct contradiction to its developer's stated ambition. Those prepared to look past the faults, who either know what they're doing or are prepared to learn the hard way, will fall quickly in love with the most exquisitely designed fighting game on the market. The rest should probably wait until it's finished.

7



LIGHT RELIEF

Light attacks were a defining element in *Street Fighter IV*'s battle system. They were the perfect combo starters, with players able to tap out a few safe attacks and see if they connected before proceeding with the unsafe, but more damaging, parts of a combo. The balance of risk and reward was off, then, and Capcom has smartly addressed this in *SFV*. While a handful of characters can still combo from lights into mediums, pushback has been increased so you can't use them for lazy hit confirms. Cancel properties have been changed too, so light attacks can only be cancelled into the light versions of special moves. They're still low risk, then, but are now low reward too – just as it should be. If only Capcom had put as much thought into the game's content and structure.

Post Script

Despite 25 years of progress, fighting game AI is still terrible. Why?

Round 23 of *Street Fighter V*'s survival mode, and our opponent, Chun-Li, is crouching at the far end of the screen. Experience tells us she's holding down-back on the stick, charging up two moves at once – a common tactic for charge characters. From here, she can press forward and punch for a fireball to control space, or up and two kick buttons for an EX Spinning Bird Kick, her best get-off-me move if we get too close. Since we're at full screen, the fireball seems more likely, so we throw out one of our own. Chun-Li has a few options here: she can throw a projectile of her own to cancel ours out; she can jump over it by pressing up or up-forward, avoiding the fireball but losing her charge; or she can keep holding down-back and block it, holding on to her charge at the cost of a little chip damage.

She does none of those things, and it hits her full in the face. We throw another: that hits too. So does the third, and the fourth. She's not holding down-back – if she was, she'd have blocked them all. She's just holding down. When given two full seconds to react to a fullscreen fireball, she does absolutely nothing. In the absence of an arcade mode, Survival is the default way in which offline players will engage with *Street Fighter V*. And our opponent has just done something that no human player would ever, ever do, four times in a row.

This is the real problem with *Street Fighter V*'s offline component. When we chide Capcom for not doing enough to accommodate the lesser skilled, it's not simply a matter of there being no proper tutorial (though that would certainly be a start); it's in the way the singleplayer component teaches you to play the game. It has long been accepted that fighting game AI will never be able to prepare you for a real-life opponent. In 2016, need that really still be the case?

It's not a matter of what the CPU opponent does, necessarily, but what it doesn't. It lets you get away with things that, when repeated online, might cost you half a health bar. Jump in randomly and the AI only rarely blocks your attack, let alone knocks you out of the sky with an anti-air move. Throw a fireball at an unsafe range and you won't be punished; indeed, as our Chun-Li experience shows us, they'll probably take the hit. The game does nothing to teach you about your normal attacks, about which you can use safely and where. Throw out a Critical Art in open play and chances are it'll hit, because Capcom would prefer you to see a flashy cinematic than understand that against proper opposition, you just committed suicide.

Perhaps most galling is the game's treatment of the Shoryuken. After the Hadouken, it's *Street Fighter*'s most iconic move, and there's no greater summation of the game's delicate balance of risk and reward. Get it right, and you dish out heavy damage – and look great while doing it. Get it wrong and you go sailing up in the air like an idiot, and your opponent has a couple of seconds to decide what they're going to do to you in reprisal. Singleplayer *Street Fighter V* all but eliminates risk from the equation. Mash out the Shoryuken motion as you get up after a knockdown and, much more often than not, it'll hit. See it blocked, or miss completely, and the AI will politely stand there doing nothing. Bad luck, old chap. Would you like another go?

The AI's refusal to teach you that you've made one of the most glaring mistakes in the game is puzzling in the extreme



It's especially frustrating because *Street Fighter V* introduces a new mechanic, Crush Counter, that has been specifically designed to discourage wanton use of Shoryukens or other invincible special moves by increasing the damage on the combo that punishes them. The AI's refusal to teach you that you've made one of the most glaring mistakes in the entire game, one that has been singled out for greater punishment than ever by the design team, is puzzling in the extreme.

The logical answer is that Capcom just wants players to have fun. And if you can call 25 Survival mode fights in which you perform the same single combo over and over against a succession of idiotic opponents 'fun', then perhaps *SFV* meets its developer's ambition after all. But Capcom also wants players to stick around, yet has done nothing to address the most fundamental stumbling block in fighting games' player-retention problem: the painful transition from battering the AI to getting destroyed by human opposition.

So why can't the AI teach you a little more? Even between two human players, fighting games are about pattern recognition – you'll eat the first wakeup Shoryuken, and maybe the second, but if you get hit by the third one, you deserve to lose. And they're about dice rolls, the way a player picks from the various options at any given time. If we lapse into bad, repetitive habits, let the AI punish us. If we keep throwing out point-blank sweeps, block them and sweep us back. If we insist on wantonly jumping in, knock us out of the air. And if we sail up into the sky after a whiffed Shoryuken, hit us with your most damaging combo when we land. It's for our own good.

AI is especially important for fighting games, since it's a developer's only way of differentiating between difficulty levels. Yet for more than two decades we've given fighting game AI a free pass, labouring under the misapprehension that it's impossible for it to be any better than it is, and that it couldn't possibly be of any use anyway. That Capcom has opted against even trying to improve it may cause another generation of players to walk away. And all because the computer made them feel like a god, before their fellow man showed them they were an ant. ■

Far Cry Primal

Things were surprisingly advanced in central Europe circa 10,000 BC. There were minimaps and crafting recipes; fast travel and long-distance delivery services. They may not have got around to inventing the wheel yet, but they'd got the grappling hook sussed, and had dotted the landscape's mountainsides with handy grapple points, marked out by a crude drawing of an eagle on the rockface at ground level below. And around it all was a land handily parcelled up into the exact template of an Ubisoft open-world game: loot caches, collectibles, resting points and countless question-mark map icons designed to ensure you're never too far from something to do.

All that may sound as if the prehistoric era is a jarring fit for *Far Cry* – and if you think about it too much, it certainly is. But there's plenty of evidence to the contrary, too. Our go-to weapon in *Far Cry 3* and *4* was the bow, hunting local wildlife for crafting supplies. Ubisoft's Dunia 2 engine has wonderful fire-spreading technology, and where once we watched as the flames spread across a Skrillex-soundtracked drug field, here we marvel as a woolly rhino stampedes fire through a forest after it strayed a little too close to our flaming club. Meanwhile, neanderthal man's fondness of spirit walks – and getting high on the mulched-up eyeballs of his enemies, apparently – proves a fine vehicle for the now-standard drug-trip missions.

Ubisoft has thrived on having a rather loose grasp of historical accuracy, and in that context it's fair enough that we look past *Far Cry Primal*'s liberties with the source material. Besides, there is a more pressing concern, a fundamental issue with the very concept of setting a *Far Cry* game this far back in history. Despite the surprising technical innovations the Winja tribe have made, and the familiar chosen-one setup that fames protagonist Takkar as the man who can save his clan from extinction, *Far Cry Primal* never makes you feel particularly powerful, and as such isn't much fun.

The seeds of a decent survival game are here, though the series' recently established commitment to make you feel like an all-powerful, borderline psychotic badass means Ubisoft stops short of putting you at the mercy of your surroundings. You hunt, scavenge and gather up plants and materials, but there's no need to sustain yourself in an era where sustenance was the endgame of everything. Instead you're satisfying a checklist of arbitrary criteria – the materials needed to craft an extra spear, a bigger quiver, or an upgrade for the Winja settlement. Arriving in the frozen north, we're warned that prolonged exposure to the cold will see us freeze to death, an icy blue meter ticking down to our demise. You feel immediately threatened, though it quickly evaporates when you realise that any source of flame will warm you up in seconds. Campfires are generously placed, roadside torches are everywhere, and if you're really in a pinch you can simply set a club, arrow or spear on fire and keep yourself warm while you move. Bleeding? Just eat some meat and a leaf – you'll be fine. And while early on you're at the mercy of the local wildlife, before long all but the biggest beasts of the mesolithic era will flee the second they see you.

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

We empty out one snowy fort by hunkering down next to a fire, waiting out the cooldown between owl assasinations



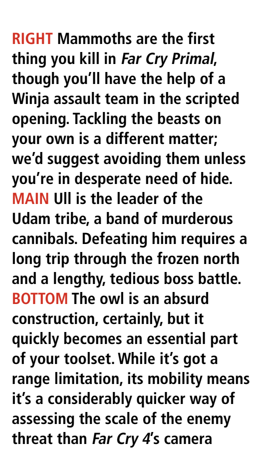
SETTLE DOWN
In the far west corner of the map is the Winja village, which starts out with a population of two – Takkar and female hunter Sayla – but increases as you complete story missions and sidequests. As the population grows and the settlement expands, more abilities and upgrades become available, and you'll even bring a few vanquished enemies back to pass on rival tribes' knowledge – to the occasional chagrin of the locals. As a way of conveying the progress of your one-man mission to save the Winja from extinction, it's fair enough, but despite your growing number it'll only ever be you and your bestiary doing the dirty work. A few tooled-up villagers would make fortress assaults a little more interesting.

Where *Far Cry 3* and *4* sought to put all the power in the protagonist's hands, *Primal* surrounds him with it instead, since Takkar is able to tame an increasingly powerful succession of animals. At first, you'll have a white wolf at your side; later, you might graduate to a cave lion or brown bear. All can be brought under your control by simply staying out of sight, luring them close with some bait, then pressing a button while they chow down. More powerful allies offer perks – automatically tagging nearby enemies, skinning and looting corpses, and, in one especially odd case, granting immunity to fire. Each can be sent off to attack specific targets, and some can even be ridden into battle. A handful of high-level hunting missions – involving *The Witcher III*-style scent-tracking and trap laying – yield the most powerful beasts, and once we get our neanderthal hands on the Bloodfang sabretooth tiger, we don't look back, since only the biggest enemies put up a fight against it.

Then there's the owl, which plays the role of the previous games' camera. Off it goes, surveying the ground below, permanently marking on your minimap the location and type of enemies in the vicinity. Spend a few skill points and it will gain the ability to swoop down and kill a single target; later, kills become even easier. It may seem churlish to complain about not feeling powerful enough in a game where your tactical owl can drop bombs full of bees, but when that and a one-button tiger kill are the most effective tools in your arsenal, you've got a bit of a problem. We empty out one snowy fort by hunkering down next to a fire, waiting out the cooldown between owl assasinations, and sending the tiger after anyone that comes to investigate, before heading in to mop up the stragglers and put the boss to the spear.

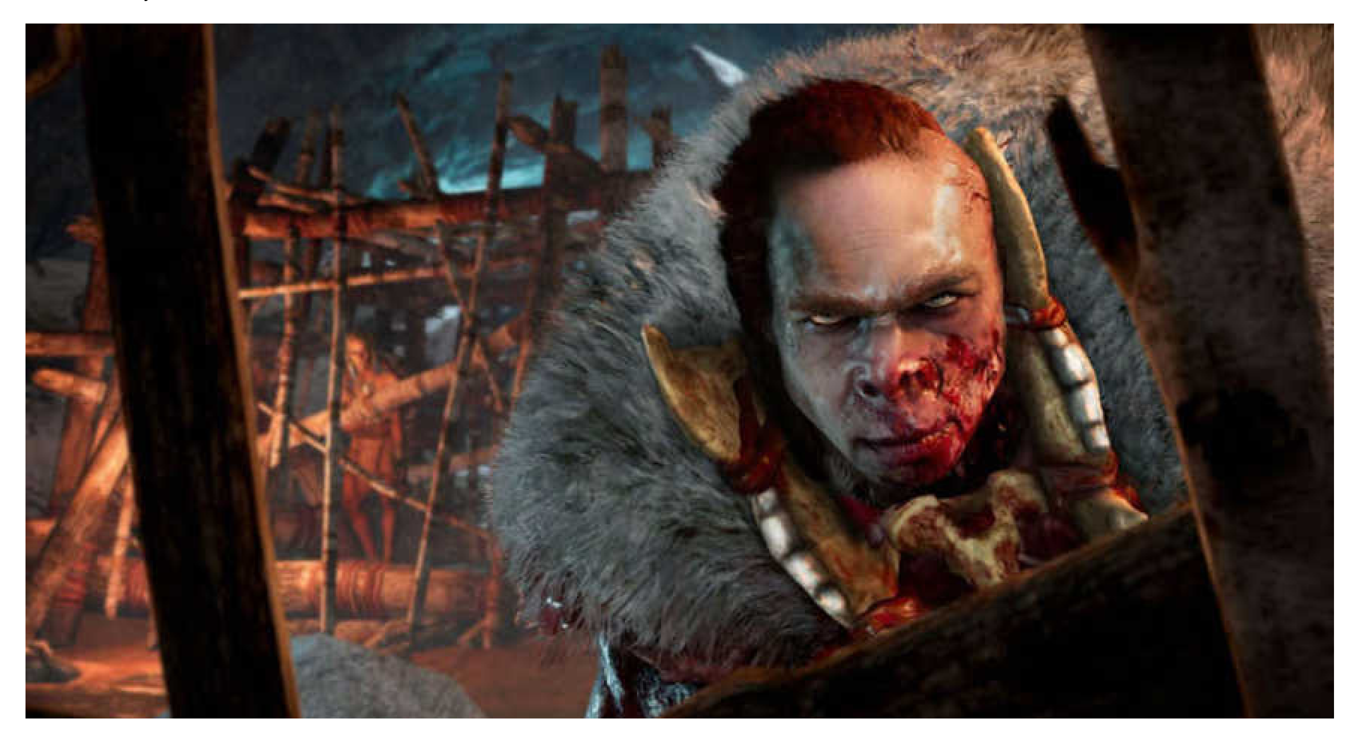
While the primitive tools in your arsenal can be upgraded over time, the enemy threat scales in kind, so you never quite feel like the all-powerful warrior the story portrays you as. It's dreadfully po-faced stuff, too, with none of the likeable levity of its predecessors. That's a natural consequence of the setting, perhaps, but the result is a game that falls awkwardly between two stools – a survival game where your survival is never really in question, and a power-fantasy playground where you're never made to feel especially powerful. The Winja may treat you like a king on your return, but the acclaim rings rather hollow. If you're going to put a crown on any of us, it's probably the owl that deserves it the most.

6



RIGHT Mammoths are the first thing you kill in *Far Cry Primal*, though you'll have the help of a Winja assault team in the scripted opening. Tackling the beasts on your own is a different matter; we'd suggest avoiding them unless you're in desperate need of hide. **MAIN** Ull is the leader of the Udam tribe, a band of murderous cannibals. Defeating him requires a long trip through the frozen north and a lengthy, tedious boss battle. **BOTTOM** The owl is an absurd construction, certainly, but it quickly becomes an essential part of your toolset. While it's got a range limitation, its mobility means it's a considerably quicker way of assessing the scale of the enemy threat than *Far Cry 4*'s camera









ABOVE A broad swing of a club is the most effective option against groups of enemies, but we use them most often as impromptu light sources, given that they take a little longer than spears or arrows to burn out ▶



Bonfires dot the landscape and offer fast travel and access to your stash once you've cleared out the surrounding threat and claimed the flame for the Winja. It's yet another implementation of Ubisoft's long-running viewpoint/radio

Post Script

Etched on a cave wall in prehistoric Europe is the next chapter of Ubisoft's design document

The past few months have suggested that Ubisoft is changing its ways. Confirmation that there won't be a new *Assassin's Creed* game on shelves in 2016 came as long-overdue recognition that a series which is in almost constant production across Ubisoft's remarkable network of global studios was never going to change unless the publisher let up the pace a little. Meanwhile, a similarly long-awaited hands-on with *The Division* yielded what seemed like a conscious move away from Ubisoft's increasingly well-worn template for open-world games.

However, *Far Cry Primal* suggests otherwise – that rather than representing a break from Ubisoft's house style, these games are simply the first signals of its evolution. *Primal*'s opening hours see you travel to far-flung lands to rescue a series of Winja specialists – a renowned hunter, a fearsome warrior, a weapons expert, and so on – and bring them back to your village. Once set up in their new digs they provide more missions and a new skill tree; their huts are upgraded with materials found out in the world, which rewards more missions, skills and tools.

This is almost identical to the beginning of *The Division*, where you head out into a virus-stricken New York to rescue three specialists in medical, tech and security, to serve as heads of department in your base of operations, doling out missions and unlocking skills in exchange for progress. It's a fine idea: it pushes the player far across the map from the off, and gives them more control over what they do and the order in which they do it. And at the moment it feels novel, but Ubisoft's greatest organisational trick – the way its global studio network collaborates and shares knowledge – means that we'll likely be sick to the back teeth of it in a few years.

So is *Assassin's Creed* taking a gap year and heading off to Egypt to find itself? Or is the break simply to ensure that it can get in lock step with the latest draft of Ubisoft's company-wide design document? The rumour mill leans towards the former – certainly, Ubisoft's most successful series should be defining the company's style guide rather than following it. But Ubisoft's recent history – of graphical downgrades and broken promises, of buggy launches and wearying re-use of gameplay systems – means that it's a difficult company to trust at the moment.

Yet the investor call on which Ubisoft confirmed the absence from store shelves of *Assassin's Creed* also yielded an intriguing hint that more substantial change is happening behind the scenes. It seems the company increasingly sees its future in multiplayer games rather than colossal singleplayer action-adventures. Perhaps that's just corporate bluster, sweetening the pill of a slightly lacklustre fiscal performance while smartly building excitement for the imminent launch of *The Division*. But if it's true, then the company must surely realise that its existing style guide for open-world games has an urgent appointment with the shredder.

But that forward-looking announcement also puts the old, fraying template into a kinder context. All Ubisoft wants is for players to keep on playing, to keep the disc in their machines and out of the preowned section, and it has long been accepted that an endless multiplayer game is the most effective way of achieving that aim. But it also explains why it builds its singleplayer games the way it does: plaster the map with icons, tell the player they're only at 20 per cent completion despite the fact that they just polished off the campaign, ensure that they are never far from a sign that they still have unfinished business to attend to, and maybe you can keep the game off their trade-in pile for a little while longer. In this light, *Far Cry Primal* feels oddly like a farewell: one final outing for a gameplay formula on the brink of extinction, a trip back in time to bury something whose time has been and gone. ■

The Flame In The Flood

Four wolves? That's just not cricket. And we were only going to grab a couple of saplings to make a snare for the rabbits at the next stop to stave off starvation for a bit longer. It's not as if our grumbling stomach is our fault either. We've been subsisting off fruit and flora – sadly, it turns out high consumption of mulberries produces laxative effects – because the rain keeps preventing us from lighting a campfire and cooking up a batch of ash cakes from the 17 stalks of corn we're hoarding. Oh, well. Now we've got a couple of lacerations to distract us from intestinal discomfort.

Mother Nature's own RNG is stacked against you in this Roguelike survival game from Massachusetts-based indie The Molasses Flood. As grimly unforgiving as the world is, it's a handsome kind of dystopia: a rich chunk of rustic Americana, all rushing torrents and ramshackle settlements painted with characterful detail in saturated colour. As the resourceful Scout, you're dragged downstream on a rickety raft, pulling ashore onto small patches of land to search for the supplies that will, with luck, extend your journey.

Scout's a stoic young woman, but she's cursed with an extraordinarily fast metabolism, one that will have her gasping for a meal minutes after she's eaten a seared rabbit or boar steak. You've also got to keep her hydrated, while ensuring her body temperature doesn't drop too low and that she rests often enough to prevent her perishing from sheer exhaustion. She's not so much a character as a series of meters to anxiously watch as they deplete, and top up whenever you're able.

While similar items can be stacked, your pack only has room for 12 slots, a paltry number that means you spend much of the early game shuffling things around in your inventory, temporarily stuffing the least crucial items in the pack of your dog, Aesop, and traipsing back to the pier to dump more on the raft to free up more space. A new pouch would seem to be a priority, then, but for that you'll need two rabbit hides and a stitching kit made from a fish hook and a fishing line. The most efficient way of catching a rabbit is a snare, crafted from two braided cords and two saplings – and for braided cords you'll need to pick cattails. That's a heck of a shopping list already, and that's assuming you don't pick up an injury on the way. You'll have plenty of rags, but without alcohol you can't make a bandage, and that's a rarity. Then again, it's getting dark, and you'll need that alcohol to make a torch to ward off wild beasts. Could we lure them into a spear trap? Ah, but that requires three more saplings and braided cords, and we've not seen either of those for the past half-mile.

The Flame In The Flood wants you to ponder this kind of dilemma: whether to suffer the debilitating effects of an unstitched wound, or to wrap up against the increasing chill by using the same needle and thread to make yourself a rabbit-pelt hat. To follow a glug of unfiltered water with a penicillin chaser to treat the subsequent stomach bug, or to spend valuable time and resources finding room for a campfire to make a refreshing drink of dandelion tea. In theory, survival is about knowing when to keep searching and when to move on, and steadily gaining an understanding of where your priorities should lie.

In actuality, it's almost impossible to make an informed choice, because you've no idea what's around the corner. Why bother reserving valuable storage space for potential improvements to your raft when you might be three miles away from another marina? Even on the lower of the game's two difficulty settings, you're rarely afforded the opportunity to formulate a plan, because you're always having to react to your current circumstances. You'll pull up to a pier with a rough strategy, an idea of what you're hoping to scavenge and craft, and invariably leave without having achieved it – more often than not, having picked up an additional ailment during your visit. Carelessness will diminish your chances of living to see another day, but there are precious few ways to actively improve the odds. Most of the time you're left hoping for a lucky break, and those don't come around too often.

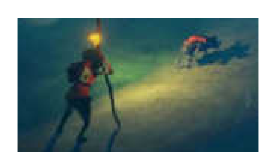
Surviving isn't supposed to be easy, of course. But there's a line between challenging players and screwing them over, and *The Flame In The Flood* regularly crosses it. Your fortunes are consistently bound to the roll of an invisible die, though on the third occasion your torch has been extinguished by a sudden downpour while surrounded by animals meaning to do you harm, you begin to suspect something more sinister than unfortunate coincidence. An arbitrary restriction on building a fire near a fishing shack – on what appeared to be a perfectly acceptable patch of open ground – cost us an hour of progress when we were seconds away from treating a venomous bite. This came courtesy of a snake Aesop had failed to warn us about, preferring instead to bark wildly at a piece of flint we'd just dropped. Another hour was wasted on the subsequent run as Scout was left inexplicably paralysed by a charging boar, while a later glitch saw a checkpoint fail to trigger, sending us seven miles back upstream.

Lacking the stark chills of *The Long Dark* and *Don't Starve*'s mordant wit, *The Flame In The Flood* best captures the central woman-versus-nature conflict when Scout is riding downriver, wrenching her raft away from floating debris and rocky banks as the current tries to steer her into peril. The whoosh of the churning rapids buffeting her unwieldy craft provides a sensory thrill that's mostly absent elsewhere. The human instinct to carry on no matter what should feel like a primal struggle; dying while fiddling inside your inventory is a pretty pitiful way to go.

6

Developer/publisher The Molasses Flood
Format PC, Xbox One (version tested)
Release Out now

Carelessness will diminish your chances of living to see another day, but there are precious few ways to improve the odds



STREAMING DISCONTENT
The Flame In The Flood began as an endless survival game with permadeath, though feedback convinced The Molasses Flood to develop a campaign mode with two difficulty settings. Survivalist gives you fewer resources and drains your stats quicker, while Traveler is marginally more generous with supplies and features checkpoints – albeit ones spread some distance apart. There is, too, a story of sorts. You'll sporadically encounter other survivors along the way, from a pair of feral kids to a curious old woman at a gas station. Given the lack of human contact elsewhere, such encounters are exciting at first, though their gnomic pronouncements in the exchanges that follow hardly feel like sufficient reward for having discovered them.



LEFT A boar's charge can be dodged with a quick dash, but wolf attacks are more unpredictable. They won't follow you once you reach the first of the wooden slats leading to the pier, allowing you to set up a trap. BELOW When you're out on the river, orange icons will appear to highlight places at which you can scavenge. Occasionally you'll have to choose one of two options as the river forks, or battle against currents to be able to dock. MAIN Your raft is your most tangible sign of progress. Obtain enough hardware and you can upgrade its storage space, install a rudder and even build a roof



ABOVE It becomes quickly apparent that a robust narrative wasn't a priority for the campaign mode, though strangers do add a little colour. It pays to be polite, since they may be willing to share their supplies with you





Unravel

Unravel protagonist Yarny is an inscrutable presence. A vulnerable, apparently benign contortion of thread that resembles both a rustic child's plaything and a horned devil. It's an ambiguity that's reflected in the game: a mix of gorgeous visuals and occasional platforming brutality; heartwarming playfulness and heartbreaking melancholy.

Central to the game is a smart physics-based mechanic that conceives of a creature permanently tethered to the unfurling ball of yarn from which he emerged. In need of continual replenishment from scraps of thread along the way – both to extend his reach and progress through the level without becoming an emaciated (and quite unnerving) wretch – Yarny must carefully manage his route, and so a considerable portion of the challenge comes from ensuring you have enough length left in you to construct the cat's-cradle-like puzzle solutions and reach the next bobbin.

But assuming ample thread is to hand, Yarny can make good use of his mutable woollen body. Lassos can be tossed to ensnare out-of-reach attachment points; large drops can be abseiled down, while cavernous pits can be swung across; and simple rope bridges can be constructed by tying off your yarn at two nearby points. You'll also need to experiment with rusting mechanisms, keep rafts from floating out of reach, and contend with unwelcome attention from all manner of unfriendly wildlife. But despite this rich seam, *Unravel* leans a little too heavily on the creation of bridges (which also double up as trampolines) and moving objects across them, while some of its more interesting ideas are left under-explored.

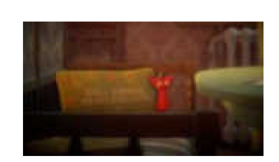
Still, the game's yarn-driven locomotion is, for the most part, deeply satisfying. The result is a moreish abstraction of rock climbing – as you dangle, clamber and decide whether to tie off your thread before a risky leap, or gamble to ensure you have more to play with on the other side – in the same way a *Trials* game distills the sensation of riding a bike on a 2D plane. Yarny can fling himself into the air while mantling, too, and the spooling thread behind him twists and flexes as it settles into a bright red record of your journey and snags on outstretched scenery.

It's lovely stuff, but *Unravel* isn't always so intuitive. While you're able to push and pull some objects around the environment, it's sometimes not clear which parts of a scene are interactive. Similarly, although the attachment points that Yarny can make use of are marked with a little tangle of red thread – and even sparkle when you're in range – they often don't stand out enough from the detailed, busy backgrounds, leading to some flow-breaking stoppages.

When sheared of the need to use thread, *Unravel*'s platforming foundations also prove shaky. Yarny isn't always as responsive as you'd like, and a handful of sections where you need to balance on diminutive pieces of flotsam prove particularly maddening as you frantically tap the jump button to avoid being tossed into the water (Yarny can't swim, and will expire after a short time in a pond or river irrespective of whether his head is above the surface). All this means that the infrequent *Limbo*-esque trial-and-error deaths don't inspire a chuckle so much as a beleaguered sigh. But it's hard to hold any of this against a game as earnest and well-meaning as *Unravel*. ColdWood Interactive constructs its bittersweet tale of friendship, love and family ties around its developers' memories of growing up in Sweden and imbues every level with an entrancing sense of childhood adventure and wonder. Aside from one level, which abandons subtext for something more heavy-handed, the game's grown-up themes are examined with a refreshingly light and – despite an all-male development team – feminine touch.

Developer ColdWood Interactive
Publisher Electronic Arts
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

The familial warmth conceals some tough platforming challenges and unexpected elements of horror



BUTTON UP
Each level contains collectable buttons, which are usually concealed in hard-to-reach areas. Getting to them involves some of the game's most challenging, and enjoyable, navigation puzzles as you divert precious thread to ascend into a tree's branches, or dangle precariously over the mouth of a cave. The levels themselves are accessed by reaching framed photographs in a homely hub area. While it's fun to explore at first, having to run and climb your way all the way from the beginning each time you want to start a new level (or retry an old one in order to find missed buttons) begins to feel like a chore the more times you're forced to do it.

It's also an exceptionally beautiful game. ColdWood's take on Sweden's coasts and woodland feels convincing despite their need to conform to the game's contrived physics puzzles. Little mushrooms bob and sway as you push through them; waves roll in and out across multicoloured pebbles and ageing wooden structures; and simple encounters with a butterfly or an ambling hedgehog are elevated to feel extraordinary.

As you move through each location, spectral images of past events shimmer into focus in the background – a boating trip, perhaps, or time spent exploring the woods with a best friend – before coalescing into a glowing light for Yarny to collect. At the end of each level, these memories populate a photo album that charts the life of the ageing lady who unknowingly brings Yarny into being at the beginning of the game when a ball of red yarn falls from her knitting basket. It feels like it's designed to make you reach for the phone in order to check in on distant relatives.

But if that sounds too mushy, the game's familial warmth conceals some tough platforming challenges and unexpected (though entirely welcome) elements of horror along the way. One particularly memorable section requires you to maintain a light source in a darkened room while trying to avoid spending too much time on the floor, upon which hundreds of cockroaches skitter about. Stray too far from the bug-repelling illumination and Yarny will be swarmed as he comes to a nightmarish end.

Unravel is surprising in many ways. That its underlying systems don't always match up to its confident exterior is a pity, and there's scope to explore many of the ideas ColdWood toys with in much greater depth. But like its enigmatic protagonist, *Unravel* is never anything less than charming, even during moments when it doesn't quite hold together.

7

RIGHT Puzzles like this, which tease a more freeform use of Yarny's thread, are disappointingly rare. **MAIN** Yarny doesn't get on well with water, so care must be taken when crossing ponds and rivers. **BOTTOM** The memories that show up during levels underscore your role on the periphery, looking in









ABOVE While the game will raise plenty of smiles along the way, it's at its best when darker elements creep into view (sometimes literally) amid its subtler storytelling moments. This grim sequence is particularly memorable

Assassin's Creed Chronicles

Given the way it forcibly discourages killing, *Assassin's Creed Chronicles* spends an alarmingly long time telling you how to do it. Poor Arbaaz Mir, for example, regularly finds himself torn away from his quest to recover a shiny MacGuffin by combat tutorials, as his mentor reminds him how to stab, block and roll over opponents. He'll also learn the art of the jump kill, the slide kill and the counter, and should he opt to use any of these moves he'll be vigorously punished by his game's own grading system. The more you're able to avoid confrontation, the more upgrades you'll receive – upgrades that are, of course, next to useless for silent Assassins, but which would certainly benefit those least likely to unlock them.

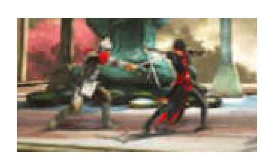
This kind of counterintuitive design runs through the entirety of this three-game spinoff series, a trilogy that begins with some promise in 16th-century China and ends in Russia's October Revolution, having squandered almost all of it. Developer Climax Studios' evident aim is to build upon a foundation of rigid mechanical design, of the kind found in classics such as *Prince Of Persia* and Paul Cuisset's *Flashback*, using contemporary refinements including analogue controls and more complex AI. Yet the unsatisfactory result falls awkwardly in the middle, lacking the predictable readability of older systems and the flexibility of the new. It's a game that appears to give you the tools to choose your own path and then penalises you for not following the route the designers want you to take.

It needn't have been this way, and there are flashes of the potential in its approach. There's the squirming tension of a non-lethal takedown, as you commit to a lengthy animation cycle and watch in horror as another guard's vision cone gets steadily closer. And while it happens far too infrequently, the moments when you successfully create a distraction, or cause mass panic by dimming the lights, provide the sense of empowerment you'd expect when taking charge of a lethal hunter. Yet for the most part you're left feeling exposed and vulnerable. Even if you've earned enough points for that extra bar of health, one shot can be enough to return you to the previous checkpoint, and that's when causing an alert doesn't automatically mean failure. On one occasion we'd successfully completed three objectives without detection and were mere seconds from a Gold Silencer award (no sightings, one takedown), when two guards inexplicably burst through a door behind us, encountering the lone corpse we'd left in the open.

You're hardly helped by a camera that struggles with the challenge of effectively framing multiple planes. You can blunder into trouble by entering a room before the game is ready to show you a cross-section, while during one river-crossing sequence in *Russia*, it's hard to glean the precise position of a spotlight until you're gunned down in the middle of it. In theory, being shown a visible radius of a guard's alertness as well as the limits of their eyesight should make it easier to parse than 3D stealth. In practice, when you're looking at several cones across multiple planes, it's a bit of a mess.

Developer Climax Games
Publisher Ubisoft
Format PC, PS4, Vita, Xbox One (version tested)
Release Out now (Vita Apr 5)

China finds the sweet spot between the two design disciplines more often than its successors



CONFLICT OF INTEREST
One thing *Chronicles* does well is communicating character through combat. Shao Jun's techniques are brutally efficient; the similarly athletic Arbaaz Mir adopts a more flamboyant approach; *Russia*'s Nikolai Orelov has the kind of keen eye that only comes with experience; and Anastasia's frantic stabbings are a symbol of her fear and anger towards her oppressors. All of which is at odds with the grading system: though you'll still earn points for silent kills, the moment you engage an enemy face to face you're all but committing to losing that stage's most valuable unlockable skill. As such, you're often best allowing yourself to be shot or skewered, especially as alerts often prompt reinforcements, with 1v2 soon becoming 1v6.

It's particularly galling since the first of the three games has clear potential. Shao Jun may be more cipher than character, but games could cope with more smart, no-nonsense women heroes with blades in their feet. *China*'s painterly environments are a little washed out, but it finds the sweet spot between the two design disciplines more often than its successors, affording you greater margin for error and combat mechanics that allow you to fight your way through if caught. Throwing knives, too, makes for a cathartic alternative to all that hiding and sneaking, while the sub-*Uncharted* escapes and timed pursuits only fleetingly halt the momentum.

India compensates for *China*'s comparatively drab palette in some style, its early stages in particular a vibrant festival of hyper-saturated colour. Perhaps chastened by criticisms of the first game's relatively easygoing challenge, Climax ramps up the difficulty in the worst possible way: checkpoints are spaced farther apart, while, by contrast, the gaps between patrols are now vanishingly small, forcing a level of precision for which the sometimes sluggish controls are far from ideal. There may be more ways to respond to danger, but you'll need to move all the quicker, and it's agonising to slowly grapple up to the ceiling only for a guard to turn his gaze skyward when his prior movements suggested a man blighted by tunnel vision. Enemy behaviour is comically mercurial. A white vision cone means an opponent has no knowledge of our existence. How odd: half a minute ago, we gutted his friend in front of him.

Finally, we find ourselves in *Russia*, wondering why so many of our friend's captors have come from Omsk, and why they're so keen to remind their comrades of this fact. Then again, repetitive conversational dialogue was always likely to be more noticeable on an 11th attempt to kill eight guards without alerting anyone, even though we reached our prisoner and had an escape route, having offed only three. A misguided notion that all *Chronicles* needed was an excessively grainy presentation and some exacting sniper sequences makes *Russia* the worst of the trilogy, despite the perverse pleasures of an amusingly absurd story that pitches Anastasia Nikolaevna as a knife-wielding maiden of vengeance, aided by a veteran Assassin whose main talent appears to be breathtaking naivety.

Had Climax been able to condense the best parts of all three games – *China*'s pared-down and accessible design, *India*'s looks, *Russia*'s two-character dynamic – into one, we might've had a valuable offshoot, but ultimately this is another *Assassin's Creed* that succumbs to inconsistency and bloat.

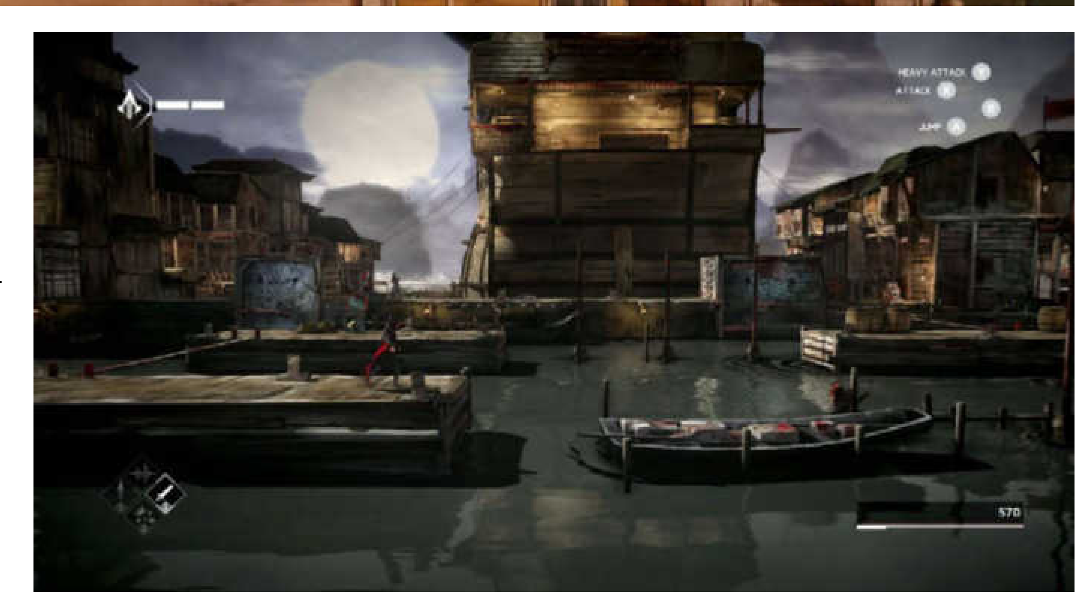
5





ABOVE Mir's chakram can be bounced off nearby walls to hit chimes as a distraction, though there's little point sneaking past the next guard if you've already been penalised for killing a previous one





TOP A rare example of a successful frontal melee attack in *Russia*. Still, mask-wearing guards are resistant to smoke bombs, so occasionally needs must.
MAIN Yes, you'll still plummet from high plinths to synchronise your map, which highlights the location of items and key personnel for main quests and side objectives. Chests are worth seeking out for score bonuses, though they're often well-guarded.
RIGHT You'll experience déjà vu if you play all three games in short order, since several sequences are recycled and reskinned. *China*'s timed sections are less fussy than its successors'; an escape from a marauding tank in *Russia*'s final stage is so abysmally designed that it's difficult to imagine many players summoning the fortitude required to finish it

The Town Of Light

A psychiatric hospital is hardly an unfamiliar setting for a videogame, though the history upon which *The Town Of Light* draws is the kind that has itself inspired several contemporary horrors. This is a fictional story, but one based on real-life accounts of the conditions within a now-abandoned asylum in Volterra, Tuscany. A lifeless English voiceover isn't the only reason to switch to Italian with subtitles: the native language lends further veracity to an already authentic rendering of the institution. The cracked plaster, exposed brickwork, smashed basins and rusted bed frames at times seem a little too artfully arranged for maximum aesthetic impact. Not so, as even the most cursory research proves, it's all disturbingly real.

There's an eerie frisson that accompanies your first trepidatious steps through Volterra's doors, then, and it's one that lingers for the four-hour duration of your stay. As you explore, you'll trigger memories of a former resident, Renée, who was committed at 16. Through documents, letters and medical notes, the fragments of her story are slowly pieced together, raising questions of whether she should've been admitted in the first instance, while touching upon a possibly abusive past.

Renée may be mentally ill, but it's unclear whether an existing condition has been adversely affected by her treatment, or if she was even unwell when she arrived. Is the therapy, as she suggests, designed to instil madness rather than address it? The truth remains elusive, because Renée is an unreliable narrator, and how much you consider her to be so will inform the responses you choose while leafing through her medical history. Further questions are raised here: can she really deny what's on the page, or is the hospital lying about her more extreme behaviour to protect itself?

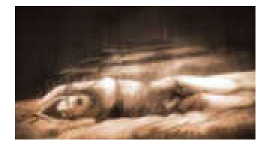
We hear tales of her violence and verbal abuse towards nurses who are, we're told, only trying to help. By stark contrast, in disturbing hand-drawn cutscenes we witness Renée being grotesquely manhandled by a corpulent guard. The harrowing potency of these images may well provoke anger, but that sense of injustice is felt equally keenly in quieter moments; a discovery of a stack of undelivered letters that might've brought Renée some small comfort is truly upsetting.

If the game's refusal to deliver a narrative that follows the conventional journey from darkness to light is admirable, it's rather less confident in its delivery. Adherence to the geography of Volterra means your journey is anything but elegant. That in itself isn't a criticism, but retracing Renée's steps needn't result in quite so much confusion. True, you'll usually have a fair idea of your destination – and on the occasions you're not informed by the voiceover or clued in by the item in your possession, a press of the H key offers a helping hand. But occasionally the hints are cryptic, and at other times you'll have to negotiate the asylum's confounding layout to find the room you're seeking. Renée's inner monologue is only triggered at specific points, and the same applies to the ambient soundtrack.

Indeed, this unsettling medley of atonal notes and white noise is rather too suggestive of Akira Yamaoka's work on *Silent Hill*. The light puzzle elements that invite you to search for specific objects and ferry them elsewhere, meanwhile, are jarringly juxtaposed with sequences where you're simply asked to sit and listen as Renée reads out a medical document and soberly remarks upon its contents. These are interspersed with woozy monochromatic flashbacks, as a sedated Rénee is observed by impassive doctors, or strapped into a gurney and wheeled down lengthy corridors. At times, it's like a low-budget interactive documentary; at others, it adopts a more orthodox genre narrative and the results are predictably inconsistent.

Developer/publisher LKA.it
Format PC (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now (PC), 2016 (Xbox One)

At times, it's like a low-budget interactive documentary; at others, it adopts a more orthodox genre narrative



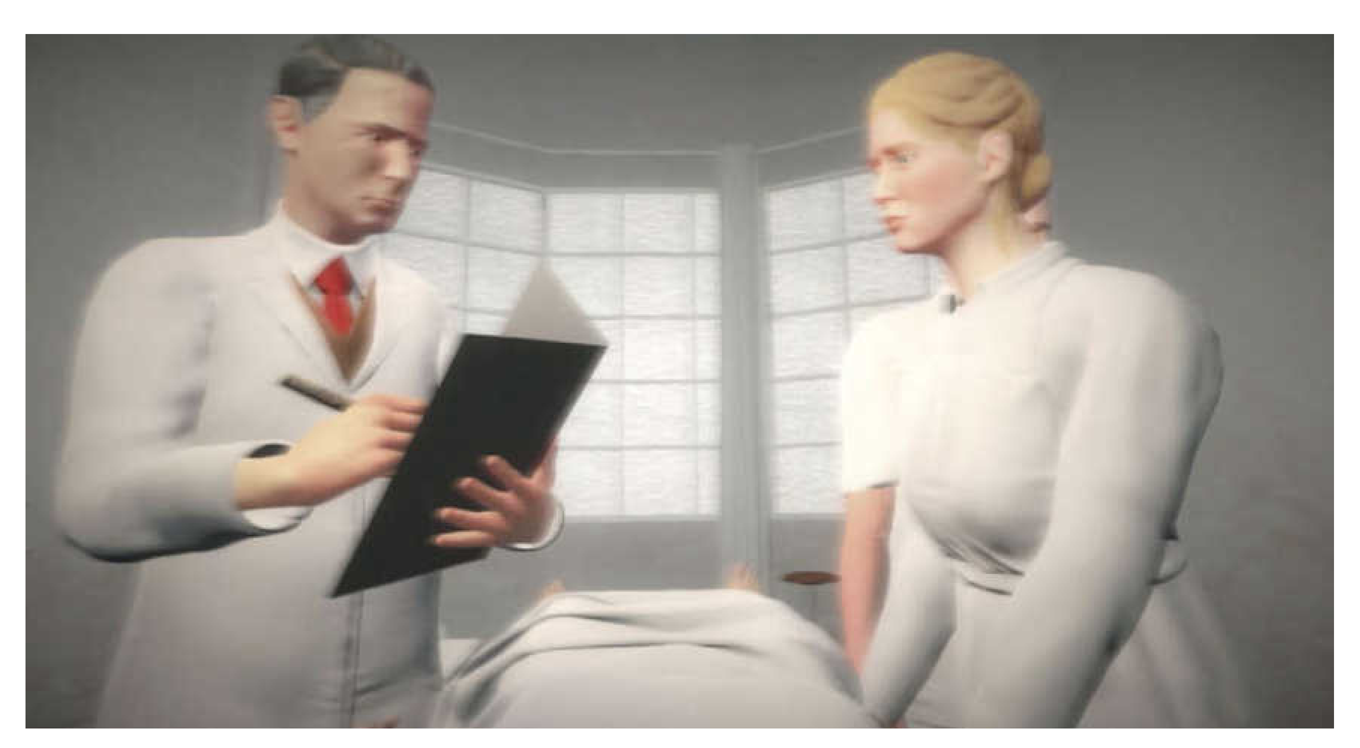
LIGHT SPLITTER
Regardless of the choices you make, Renée's story ends up in the same place, though you can make quite a difference to how certain events play out. An early choice whether or not to read an official document sees the narrative path diverge for the first time: a troubled Renée can opt not to read the 'forbidden' text for fear of causing trouble, but should she steel herself to uncover the truth, her relationship with a fellow patient will change. In the final act, your response to a letter represents another turning point, and this time the differences are starker. Though there's no 'good' or 'bad' ending per se, Renée's subsequent actions carry a significant emotional weight. Her story is already a tragedy, but it can become bleaker still.

Oddly, this isn't always a hindrance. While the game asks you to overlook some obviously rough edges, particularly in the UI and a localisation that could've used a couple more passes, the incongruity of these shifts adds to the sense of dislocation. The player's own disorientation proves an uncomfortably close match to that of Renée herself, and though budgetary restrictions have much to do with Volterra's player-unfriendliness, its inflexible nature creates a startling sense of being trapped within a system that refuses to yield to the wants and needs of the individual.

It would be generous to suggest this was entirely by design; likewise, that the simplistic character models in flashback should aptly resemble automatons, impassively carrying out their terrible duty. Technical blemishes betray the developer's inexperience, too – on occasion resulting in an inability to extricate yourself from interactive objects. Yet there are indelibly powerful moments: a firstperson scene of shock therapy isn't one we'd wish to revisit in a hurry, while later there's an unflinching sequence of body horror that some players will find hard to watch.

This, and those earlier scenes of abuse, makes explicit the cruelty *The Town Of Light* otherwise invites you to imagine and, as such, a game that shows admirable restraint for the most part – there isn't a single jump scare to be found – will likely face accusations of gratuitousness. Whether you consider these sequences a self-conscious wallow in depravity, or a forceful depiction of the inhuman treatment inflicted on Volterra's patients, the disparity is especially harsh. But while this speaks volumes for the developer's uncertainty in how to tell its story, it's a difficult game to dismiss. During one jolting recollection, a weary Renée sighs, "These walls have become my skin." For all its faults, there's every chance *The Town Of Light* could end up getting under yours.

6







ABOVE The Italian actor's wounded, sober delivery is more in keeping with the game's fiction than the English alternative. Renée's voice, we learn, carries the same sadness and intelligence as when she arrived at Volterra



MAIN In a smart inversion of genre standards, light is often something to be feared. It's only in darkness that Renée can find peace, illustrated by a sequence where you're encouraged to dim the lights and close the window shutters. ABOVE Certain areas are locked off until the game invites you inside, and voiceovers may pipe up to tell you you're going the wrong way, but often you have the run of the place. That freedom is smartly contrasted with flashbacks where Renée can only move her head. LEFT The surrounding area offers some respite from the clinical hospital interiors, with gentle birdsong evoking feelings of freedom and escape. Yet it's turned on its head by Renée's inner monologue, as she wonders aloud whether a life of tranquillity is worth the cost of not truly living

Dying Light: The Following

Dispatched to a farmhouse during a mission near the beginning of *The Following*, we arrive to discover that the place is being held by bandits. Our survival instinct kicks in and we run upstairs and bravely hide in the bathroom. We can hear them shouting outside – they know precisely where we are – but at no point do any of our assailants consider simply opening the door so that they might reach their prey. Techland says that AI is one of the many areas benefitting from an upgrade in *The Following*, but at times like this it's a difficult claim to take seriously.

Fortunately, many of the game's other changes and additions are laid out plainly. The star of the show is a customisable dirt buggy, which quickly becomes something of an obsession as you set about furnishing it with the best options that can be bought, scavenged or built with your own hands, ramping up its suspension, making its turbo unit more efficient, even bolting a flamethrower onto its front end. The world of *The Following* is mostly open countryside, so getting about its broad expanse in a hurry is only practical on four wheels, and it doesn't take long to turn your ride into something that not only gets you from A to B but is also capable of churning up swathes of the undead at breakneck speeds. The game warns against running over zombies, but the bonuses awarded for doing so are the quickest way of upgrading your driving skill tree, making anything with two legs a fair target as you carry out fetch quests for the surviving populace.

You get to cover a lot of ground as you rip through the main questline, but there's not a great deal of variety in what you do around *The Following*'s map. At least there are some fun new ways of taking down the swarming enemies you meet along the way. The bow may look like an appealing option on paper, but once you've got your hands on a crossbow and used it to take down the game's largest enemies with single bolts to the head, you'll form a bond that makes Darryl Dixon's relationship with his weapon of choice seem flimsy.

The Following's setting gives it a more organic flavour than the base game. It feels much more like people are living lives here, which helps to emphasise your position as an outsider, even if the people you meet, bar a handful of exceptions, fail to leave any kind of lasting impression. As before, the biggest impact is made by the scale of your zombie-evisceration spree.

If it's judged only on its atmosphere, weapons, and the amount of killing it portrays from behind the wheel, this expansion hits the bullseye. If Techland can fill in all the bits missing in between, its next project could be something special indeed.

6

Developer Techland
Publisher Warner Bros
Format PC, PS4 (tested), PC
Release Out now



DEMOLITION MAN
The Following's largest enemies, Demolishers (above), were also the biggest foes in the original game, and they're as frustrating to fight here, too, soaking up clip after clip of gunfire, and somehow hitting you with arcing punches even when it looks like you're safely out of range. It's at times like this that you'll wonder how you ever made it through *Dying Light* without the crossbow, which, aimed with appropriate care, can be a more effective option than an automatic rifle. It's quiet, too, making it the ideal tool for avoiding the attention of packs of baying Virals.

The Following **sees you investigate a cult, but it's difficult to keep your mind on the big picture when you're knee-deep in so much zombie flesh. Making the job easier are new ways of dispatching the walking dead**



Layers Of Fear

There is real tragedy at the core of Bloober Team's *Layers Of Fear*, but it has nothing to do with its histrionically delivered tale of an alcoholic artist's descent into isolation and madness. The game's central conceit – which sees a dilapidated old house continually contort and shift around you – is executed so exquisitely, with such relentless inventiveness, that you spend considerably more time excitedly charging for the next door to coo at another clever trick than you do being scared of what might lurk behind it.

But the disappointing absence of any sustained sense of fear has as much to do with the hackneyed horror staples that are wheeled out to complement this spatial chicanery. A jittery, lank-haired and black-eyed woman. A procession of animate dolls. Skittering rats that are meant to be disconcerting but somehow come over as cute. It's as if the studio didn't have enough confidence in its unsettling central idea and panicked. And then there's the voice acting, which is risible to the point of fiasco throughout.

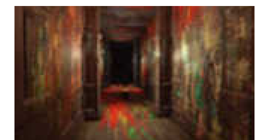
But scrape away these failings and you're left with one of the smartest examples of environmental misdirection ever committed to code. This isn't simply a case of going through a door, closing it, and then finding – surprise – a new area has been loaded when you next open it (although there's plenty of that, too). This is close-up magic performed with grin-inducing braggadocio, capable of wrong-footing you over and over. Rooms change in subtle and conspicuous ways when you turn your back, and then again when your attention is drawn. Every time you try to catch the shifting floorplan out, it's one blueprint ahead of you.

The result is a powerful erosion of any confidence in your own sense of direction. The fact that everything happens in such close quarters, flagrantly *daring* you to try to spot the method, proves intoxicating. The downside of this disrespect for the laws of physics is that any sense of place is also compromised as you pace through similar-looking corridors and rooms that all feel vaguely familiar, always leading back to the artist studio from which your nightmare begins.

The corridors certainly look nice, but to ease your passage we recommend switching off the excessive controller acceleration and head-bob options. Doing so won't alleviate the oscillating framerate issues that beset the game, but you won't feel quite as nauseous.

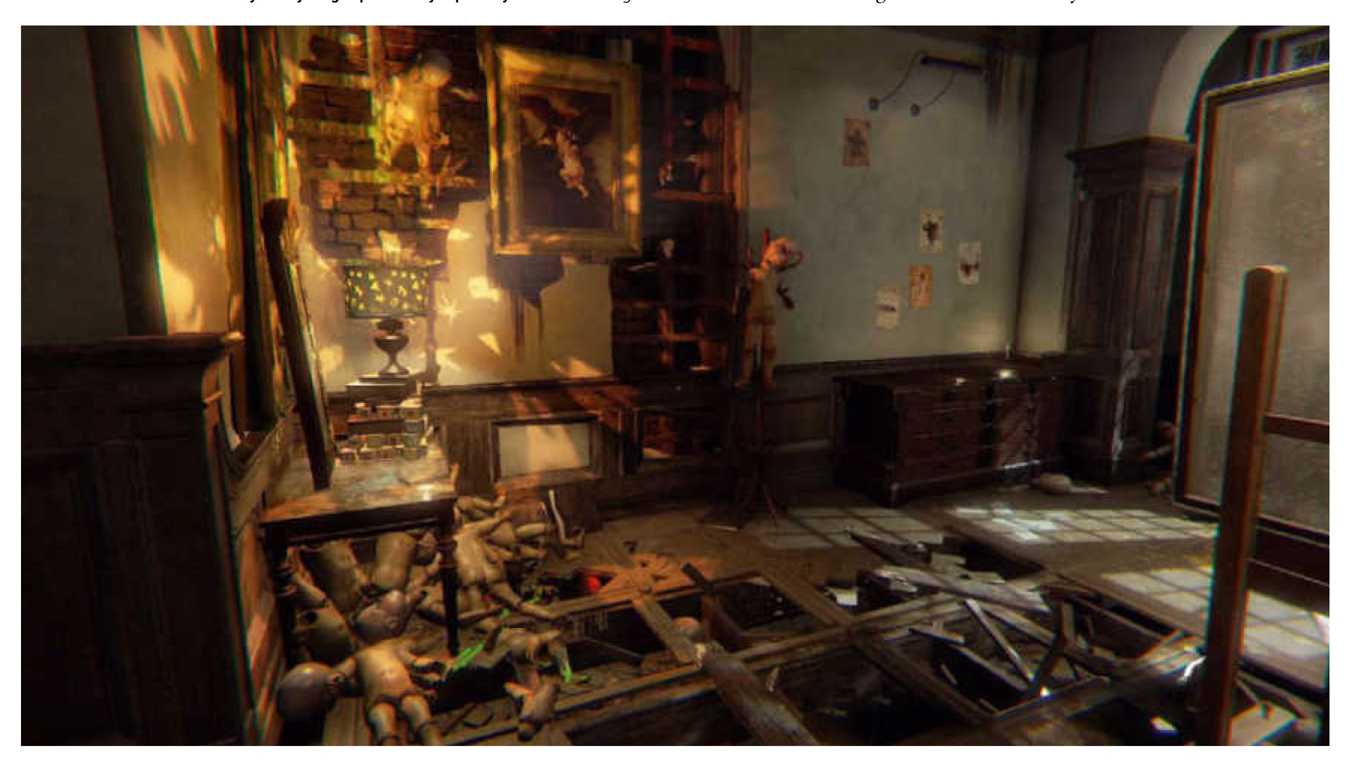
What could've been a new high-water mark for horror is weighed down by a litany of clanging missteps, but while the game's many problems conspire to tarnish its innovations, the latter are so far ahead of other games' tricks that they dazzle nonetheless. **6**

Developer Bloober Team
Publisher Aspyr
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now



MIXED SUCCESS
Layers Of Fear is at its best when it doesn't lean on established horror ideas. The game's environmental smarts are the principal example of it breaking new ground, but Bloober Team's artists have also hit on a singular aesthetic. Art and art-making become a recurring theme as paintings melt and distort, and oil paints splatter corridors colourfully. It's a kind of inventiveness that deserves to be the backdrop for more original horror themes than the game can deliver.

The game continually toys with your understanding of the environment, but smartly loops back to – and references – familiar spaces as it does so. The effect is to further disconcert you as your grasp on reality slips away



Bravely Second: End Layer

We've just fought three giant tigers and now another four have shown up. Oh, don't worry – we've got this. After all, Yew's just putting the finishing touches to a selection of poisonous gateaux to throw in their faces. Magnolia's well prepared for any incoming attacks, assuming the defensive position of a long-extinct relative of the domestic cow. Our melee attacker Tiz has strapped an axe to his head. And Edea? Well, she's hanging back in case she has to resurrect any dead allies, though we really wish she'd clean those bloodstains from her trenchcoat. At times, *Bravely Second* seems to take the safest possible route for a sequel, but its idiosyncrasies steadily pile up, building to the stage where you almost take its weirdness for granted. And then you realise that, yes, you did just send out a cat to put a robot to sleep.

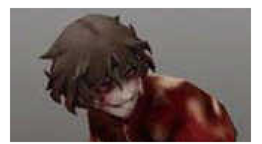
Still, many players will experience an early twinge of disappointment as a bold prologue with a seemingly all-new cast turns out to be a sleight of hand, and you find your party of four exploring the same world and meeting many of the same characters as they did in the first game. "By what strange trick of fate do your paths cross anew?" the script asks. Budgetary constraints, perhaps? A shortened development cycle? Whatever the reasons for revisiting Luxendarc, it turns out not to be such a bad idea after all. The new areas are every bit as attractive as the more familiar locales, while additional dungeons boast more striking aesthetics and layouts than their predecessors. Not forgetting, of course, the presence of a bathhouse that doubles as an airship.

Those wonderfully flexible combat mechanics haven't changed much. Each round still sees you choose between boldly spending several turns at once, leaving yourself open to attack from any enemies you didn't finish off, and assuming a defensive stance to either store them up for a later blitz or for the space to patch up the injured or enfeebled. Twelve new jobs afford you more tactical options – a welcome but hardly revelatory evolution – but the ability to chain battles to multiply rewards incentivises the discovery of efficacious combinations. Like, you know, quad-wielding ninjas.

With a story that avoids the original's lapses into lechery, vignettes that add character to your heroic foursome, and some legitimately thoughtful ideological dilemmas, you'll find yourself less tempted to skip to the action. And if the original's daring final-act gambit proved polarising, the late-game shift here manages to have a similar impact without feeling like a cost-saving exercise. As a sequel, *Bravely Second*'s steps forward at first seem small and tentative, but cumulatively they amount to a captivating follow-up.

8

Developer Silicon Studio, Square Enix
Publisher Nintendo
Format 3DS
Release Out now



UNDO INFLUENCE
Bravely Second's light-hearted tone is disrupted by the arrival of Geist, a gore-soaked, goggle-eyed, cackling force of evil, who even unsettles his superiors. Despite limited screen time, he leaves an indelible imprint, not least because defeating him gives you access to the Exorcist job asterisk. The 'undo' command allows you to take back expended brave and magic points and even bring dead team members back to full health. Sorry, White Mages – you had a good run.

Offensive magic is a more valid option than before. The Astrologian's Presence ability ensures support spells are cast at the beginning of a turn, while the Ghost status still allows the afflicted party member to use magic



American Truck Simulator

Developed by Czech studio SCS Software, the *Truck Simulator* series has been a quiet success on PC. The previous instalment, *Euro Truck Simulator 2*, stood out among a sea of niche, low-quality sims by being surprisingly polished and well-designed, with production values beyond those of most of its peers.

It is, simply, a game in which you drive trucks. You're given cargo – which ranges from toys to volatile chemicals – and have to deliver it undamaged and on time. On the way you must obey the rules of the road, submit to the occasional weigh station check (a new feature in this game), and manage your tiredness and fuel. But despite the seemingly mundane subject matter, *American Truck Simulator* is strangely engaging. Driving along, watching the scenery roll by and listening to music on the in-game radio is a pleasantly relaxing, largely undemanding experience. The driving model is satisfyingly nuanced, taking into account the rise and fall of the road and the weight of the load you're dragging behind you. The routine of switching gears, indicating, checking your mirrors, and squeezing your enormous vehicle through traffic and narrow streets requires concentration. But then you hit the open freeway and can enjoy a leisurely cruise.

Handling requires precision despite your leaden speed. One misjudged corner can mean a write-off, and even changing lanes is quite the task, though mercifully other road-users pay heed to your turning signals

Developer/publisher SCS Software
Format PC
Release Out now



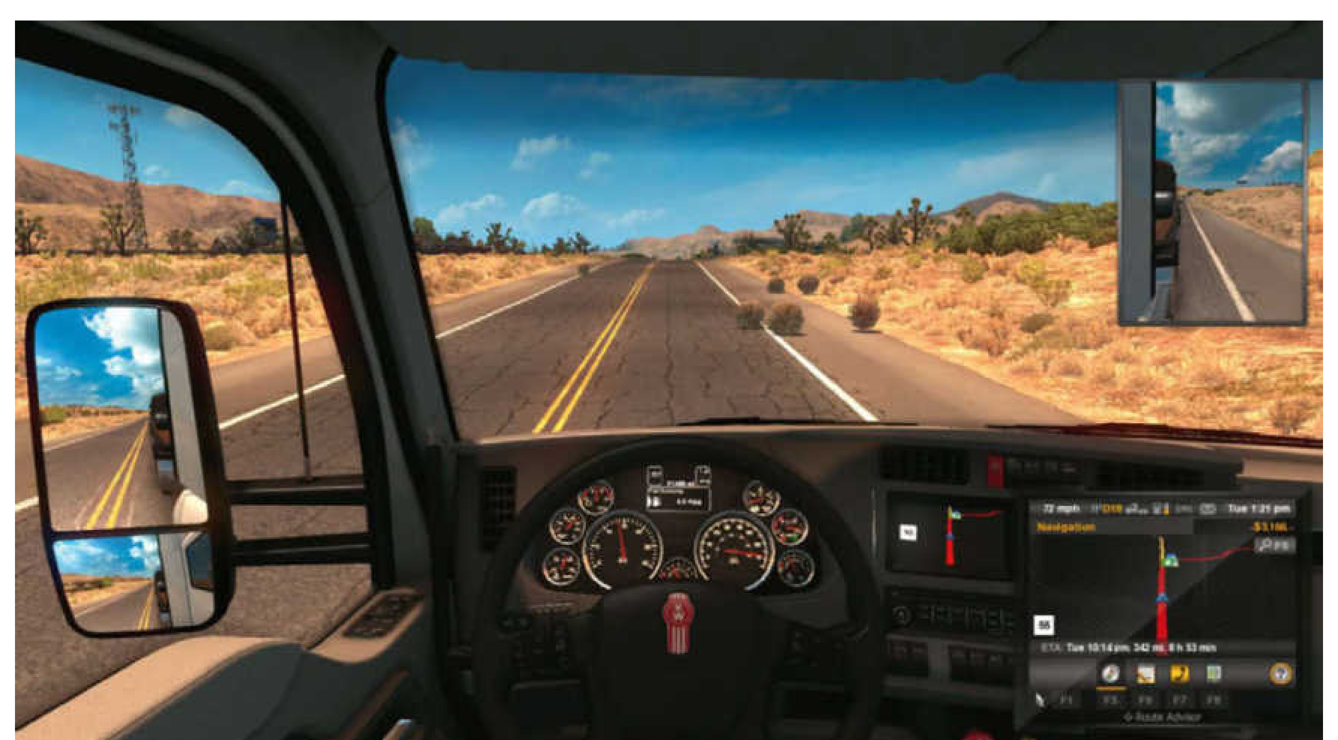
PATRIOT GAMES
When you've earned enough money you can buy your own truck, which opens up customisation. As well as mechanical upgrades like your engine and gearbox, you can decorate your dashboard and apply a number of gaudy, patriotic paint jobs, including the stars and stripes. Owning a truck means you have to pay for your own fuel and repairs, so remaining a freelance contractor is the easiest way to play.

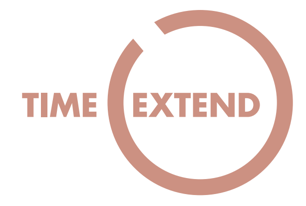
At launch, only two states are available: California and Nevada. But if *Euro Truck Simulator 2* is anything to go by, the map will greatly expand over time. Part of the appeal of the *Truck Simulator* games is that they're continually evolving, through both free updates and paid DLC. So it's best to think of *ATS* not as a full release, but the first step on a long journey.

It's a vast space, though. Driving across both states, visiting every city, will take hours. It's not a game for the time-starved: an average job can last between 30 and 60 minutes. And as you earn XP from completing them, you can upgrade your licence to take on even longer hauls, turning the game into a real test of endurance. On these long journeys, resting and refuelling become careful tactical choices.

Because of its west-coast setting, much of the scenery is desert-like, and in places a little dull. Blame reality for that – SCS has captured the look and feel of both states effectively. *American Truck Simulator* isn't much of a leap from its predecessor, and anyone who played *ETS2* may find its structure and interface a little too familiar. But the solid foundations upon which it has been built mean it's still fundamentally a curiously lovable game – one of long, lonely roads, of painstaking parking manoeuvres, and slapstick write-offs when simple turns are misjudged. There's nothing else quite like SCS's brand of cargo-hauling action.

7







Resident Evil 4

Why Capcom's 2005 action masterpiece is still without peer

By Chris Schilling

Developer Capcom Production Studio 4 **Publisher** Capcom **Format** GameCube, PC, PS2, PS3, Wii, Xbox 360 **Release** 2005

More than ten years later, it still hasn't been topped: *Resident Evil 4*'s opening remains the yardstick by which all others must be measured. No doubt some will make a compelling argument for *The Last Of Us*, though repeat plays reveal how Naughty Dog ensures the player's arms and legs are kept firmly inside the ride at all times. Inside this spartan Spanish village, however, you're the one pushing things forward: barricading doorways, leaping through windows, sprinting, spinning, shooting, kicking. Three, four, five plays later this exhilarating fusion of scripting and player-prompted mayhem still has the capacity to unsettle, from a glimpse of the immolated corpse of the policeman who drove you here to that first yelp of "un forastero", through to the insistent revving of a chainsaw motor to the pealing bells that cause los ganados to (quite literally) down tools and trudge off to their place of worship. And then, of course, that wonderfully absurd wisecrack – "Where's everyone going? Bingo?" – invites you at last to take a breath. Such is the intensity of the ordeal that it's a shock to discover that it's only about five minutes of game time. It feels like a landmark moment, and it is. So why, then, given the advancements in technology and game design since, have we seen nothing to match it?

The legacy of Shinji Mikami's opus is reported as a simple matter of fact. Its status as a game of magnitude and influence is never really questioned, but in truth it's not quite the pioneer it's often made out to be. Which isn't to say it hasn't had an impact: its over-the-shoulder camera was imitated by a number of thirdperson shooters during the following console generation, with *Dead Space* in particular owing Capcom a fairly substantial debt. But it was most vocally acknowledged by Cliff Bleszinski during development of *Gears Of War*, and it was Epic's game that would go on to become the established genre template. While the two games share a similar perspective, their approach to combat is markedly different. In *Resi 4* you're rarely given the luxury of hunkering down behind conveniently placed waist-high barriers; rather, you're expected to either provide your own cover or fire from an exposed position, planting your feet to commit to every shot, rather than cowering and sporadically popping up to let off a few rounds before roadie-running to the next position of relative safety. Rarely are you left feeling quite as vulnerable as Mikami insists you should be – even when Leon S. Kennedy hoiks a rocket launcher onto his shoulder and takes aim.

Play it again now and it takes some time to reacclimatise; we're accustomed to being able to move and fire simultaneously these days, after all. *Resi 4*'s controls were described as a step forward for the series but, in actuality, little had changed beyond the camera. Leon still moves like a tank, turning on the spot and only stepping forward when you nudge the analogue stick upward. Raising your weapon, meanwhile, gives you no choice but to literally stand your ground, ensuring you've created enough space between you and the enemy to sit through those elaborate (and heart-stoppingly tense) reload animations. If it seems to throw out much of what people loved about its predecessors, its combat still creates a similar sense of throat-tightening claustrophobia. You may find yourself in more open environments than before, but your field of vision – and thus your aim – is still limited. It's an approach modern players, accustomed to greater freedoms in control, will often react angrily against – tellingly, the letterbox presentation and narrow FOV of Mikami's *The Evil Within*, designed to evoke a similarly oppressive ambiance, was divisive enough to prompt calls for a border-free option, subsequently patched in by Bethesda.

This isn't simply a case of changing tastes or emerging trends in game design, however. It's also a matter of thematic differences. Mainstream audiences have a greater appetite for realism, which now extends to fantasy: the success of Game Of Thrones, for example, says much about our desire for any piece of fiction that dabbles in the supernatural or otherworldly to somehow reflect real-world concerns. Pulpy pop entertainment like *Resident Evil 4* is ▶

Escort missions are rarely something to relish, but fortunately Ashley is relatively easy to babysit. When separated from Leon, meanwhile, she's plausibly vulnerable: a short sequence where you guide her is fraught with tension

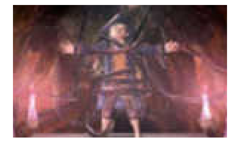
no longer appreciated by the world's tastemakers, while the horror genre has changed, too – irrevocably influenced by the rise of found-footage and torture porn that's since generated a very different brand of shocker. In the current climate, something as campy and silly as this is the kind of passé that has financiers sweating.

All of which would matter little if it was still commercially viable. But part of the reason *RE4* occupies a unique place in the medium's history is it's now financially prohibitive to make a 20-hour singleplayer game with so many bespoke elements. During the sixth console generation, Capcom was in a position where it could not only indulge Mikami's wishes to incorporate hundreds of individual assets and systems in a campaign of unrivalled pacing and variety, but also scrap two years of development on a very different version of the game to facilitate this new vision. In 2016, the market has no place for such whims. The rise of the open-world game is a testament not just to player perception of value but to publisher perception of efficiency: if sandbox games often bear the hallmarks of copy-pasting, that's because procedural design and other contemporary techniques allow developers to fill larger spaces with repurposed content. If a core mechanic is satisfying enough, most players will be happy to deal with it being repeated ad infinitum.

IT'S NOW FINANCIALLY PROHIBITIVE TO MAKE A 20-HOUR SINGLEPLAYER GAME WITH SO MANY BESPOKE ELEMENTS

While these games invite us to embrace the comfort and familiarity of routine, the beauty of *Resident Evil 4* is that it never once allows you to. Sniping sequences segue into puzzle interludes, with the briefest of lulls before a blistering siege or a boss battle. Not all of these are made equal, but each is unique: the first three alone see you harpooning a serpent on a murky lake, ducking the powerful attacks of a towering brute, and tackling an agile mutant that hangs from the rafters of a burning barn. It's hard to think of a single game released since that so often seeks to shift its tempo, to surprise the player with something new and exciting, whether it's a terrifying, rasping wheeze heralding the imminent arrival of a creature that can only be conquered with the help of thermal vision, or one-off shocks like the sudden lunge of the enemy affectionately known as Oven Man.

Even during its less celebrated sequences, it belligerently refuses to let its players settle, exemplified in the moment a headshot fails to halt an advancing villager, instead prompting the emergence of a writhing parasite from his neck. It's a startling subversion of a series staple; that aiming for the skull is an essential way to conserve ammo. Here, you're never in quite such short supply, though more daring players can save time and rounds by targeting limbs, leaving enemies vulnerable to a kick or suplex – though kneecapping a cultist is a challenge when he's clutching a wooden shield. You might prefer to stick



There's wit and intelligence within a seemingly silly script. After Leon has offed Ramon Salazar – a kind of psychotic Benjamin Button-alike – antagonist Osmund Saddler dismisses his diminutive underling as "small-time"



TETRIS ATTACHÉ

Turning inventory management into a kind of spatial puzzle game is among *Resi 4*'s best ideas, though it's rarely been imitated since. The grid-based system is hardly new, nor is the idea of larger items taking up more space: *Diablo II* adopted a similar approach, though objects couldn't be rotated as they can here. Later, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* missed the point of a physical representation of your gear by automatically rearranging items to accommodate any new additions. Successful micromanagement can be time-consuming, though it's made easier with the inclusion of a window to temporarily switch out smaller items while you figure out whether it would be more efficient to store your rifle vertically or horizontally.



Released in 2007, the Wii edition might be the pick of the bunch. It includes the additional content from the PS2 version, while incorporating pointer-based shooting. The natural waver of the aiming reticule only heightens the tension of heated encounters

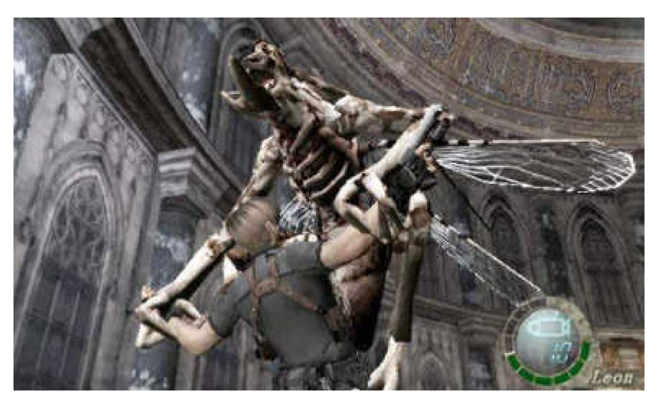
with one or two favourites from a varied arsenal, but the encounter design will regularly force you to refresh your tactics.

Capcom itself has tried in vain to recapture the magic. President's daughter Ashley proved not to be the hindrance many had feared; when she isn't a resourceful ally, she's smart enough to get out of harm's way by hiding in a dumpster. By contrast, *RE5*'s Sheva Alomar can't help but frequently step into partner Chris Redfield's line of sight, or blunder into the arms of an infected opponent. *Resident Evil 6* brought back Leon, but limited his role in a campaign that suggested Capcom had only handed a third of it to its quality assurance department. A recent trailer for spinoff *Umbrella Corps*, meanwhile, suggests the publisher simply doesn't understand what made the village so iconic, repurposing it as a map for what appears to be a generic online shooter.

Our expectations may be unfair. As time passes, it increasingly feels as if *Resident Evil 4* might've been bottled lightning: a perfect confluence of timing and talent never to be recreated. A director at the peak of his creative powers, helming a team with meaningful design experience and genre expertise. A publisher in a position to take risks and spend big on experiments with existing formulae. A playerbase willing to embrace a linear game that offers enough space for them to improvise. Maybe this wasn't actually everything games could be, but everything games were, and could never be again. At that time, few could've foreseen that the end of the PS2 era would represent the beginning of an era of western dominance; that Japan's status as the gaming superpower would soon be over.

Perhaps, then, this wasn't the shape of things to come so much as the final flourish at the end of an era: a game that said "top that!" in the knowledge no one else had the competence nor the resources to do so. And part of what makes *RE4* so exciting to this day is the knowledge no one has quite been able to follow in its footsteps. You can see something of its playfulness, its intricacies, and its hunter/hunted dynamic in the work of FromSoftware, but the likes of *Bloodborne* and *Dark Souls* are ultimately very different games in tone and tenor. Eleven years on, maybe it's time to come to terms with the fact that we might never see anything quite like *Resident Evil 4* again. But that's OK. We still have *Resident Evil 4*. ■

Mikami's team gleefully devised a variety of death animations for Leon, with the acid-vomiting Novistadors responsible for one of the most gruesome demises



STUDIO FOCUS

BEEFJACK CREATE

Whether you're established or a novice, BeefJack Create is ready to turn your game ideas into fully fledged productions



The world of videogames may be full of many different types of entertainment today, but a clearly defined division of labour has been established. It's one that is furiously productive, but it doesn't always favour those starting out with little more than a great idea. Studios make games, engine and middleware firms forge the tools of the trade, and service providers bring the likes of motion-capture and testing to the table. The rise of digital distribution and free-to-play may have dramatically affected all of those specialities and many more besides, but aside from a handful of high-profile examples such as Valve, the structure of the game-making process – and the companies that practice it – forms a neatly compartmentalised framework. And then there's BeefJack.

BeefJack began life in 2008 with BeefJack Magazine, an editorial website from founder and creative director **Shaun Leach**. Leach devoted the site's focus to indie and alternative releases, and it quickly expanded its reach to include a Flash gaming portal. It made sense, since Leach was a prolific Flash-game developer at the time, and was compelled to share what he both created and loved. BeefJack soon evolved to become a fully fledged development studio, tackling both in-house projects and client work, and in 2012 the company was about as conventional as it would ever be. In the following year, however, the team began to look at how its editorial experience could inform the creation of a new PR and marketing arm aimed at alternative games, and BeefJack Promote was born, giving game developers the means to find, reach and engage audiences.

Today, BeefJack performs a tri-fold function. Along with its Promote business, the studio now also offers BeefJack: The Game Agency, which builds games to extend brands and help organisations reach and serve their audiences. BeefJack Create, meanwhile, is a collaborative indie game development service that defies convenient definitions and offers a distinct way for indies – and individuals – to bring game concepts to life.

"Working with other businesses, with other game developers and with indies is really interesting to me," Leach says of Create. "And it's a space that nobody else in the game industry seems to be really owning."

That space is one where a flexible, collaborative development service can support studios needing extra headcount, or sole creatives with a great game idea that requires an injection of experience and guidance, along with a team shaped to bring the concept to reality. The latter point is BeefJack Create's most striking distinguishing feature, and one that is founded on flexibility.

If a small or medium-sized indie developer with a good degree of experience needs to bolster its team with a couple of animators, that's the kind of gap Create can fill, since BeefJack has at its disposal all of the tools and people needed for every aspect of high-end game production. But that same team is also poised to assist individuals with unrealised game concepts in their heads, and a sense of





FROM LEFT **BeefJack founder and creative director Shaun Leach; *Iron Fish* designer Dean Edwards; inside the BeefJack HQ, located in north London**

Studio name BeefJack Create
Founded 2012
Employees 15
URL create.beefjack.com
Location North London

the role they'd like to serve bringing those notions to life.

Leach and the Create team partner with a broad sweep of development talent, including graduates, creative talents from far beyond games with an interest in the industry, and just about anyone that has a game idea, even if they've never worked in the sector at all.

"Everybody has game ideas, and a game idea is really powerful," asserts Leach, who is at his most enthusiastic when he talks about helping those who feel they might not have the experience or diversity of skillsets needed to bring ideas to commercial reality. "Even my mum has had an idea for a game. That was 20 years ago, though, when getting an idea past the concept stage was very difficult.

"But now, the barriers to entry in making games have dropped, and tools have become more available and accessible, so a lot of the heavy lifting has been cut out. It's not just triple-A studios dominating any more. So it's now possible for anyone, from any walk of life, to make something nobody has ever seen before, and actually for a brief period of time have the world stop and stare."

But while he has an optimistic take on the opportunities that exist today, Leach is quick to highlight the gap between the accessibility of game-making technology and the reality of bringing a project together, requiring adept artists, coders, animators and audio specialists to hit a quality bar, before distribution, marketing and publishing are applied meaningfully.

The game industry may have more than its fair share of multidisciplinary auteur developers, but they alone aren't the only group capable of delivering concepts that can be both critically and commercially successful. And Leach and his colleagues want to help the novice and auteur alike, especially when their partners are prepared to punch above their weight and embrace a full game production model.

"THE BARRIERS HAVE DROPPED. IT'S POSSIBLE FOR ANYONE, FROM ANY WALK OF LIFE, TO MAKE SOMETHING NOBODY HAS EVER SEEN"

BeefJack works with Create partners in an entirely bespoke manner, the process decided on a case-by-case basis. "If somebody really experienced approaches us with a really competent game design then we'll usually try to have them at the front point of the development process," Leach explains. "We'd let them lead it, and we're there for support and resources so that person can achieve what they need."

Equally, BeefJack Create's approach has been applied when an individual partner wants to see a game idea brought to reality, while carving a niche role for themselves away from the game director's chair. When joining forces with indie James Wheeler for the in-development *Chieftain's Challenge* – pitched as '*Angry Birds* meets crazy golf' – BeefJack found a collaborator not only with a strong idea, but also a desire to input most significantly as a level designer. Leach and his colleagues built a team around Wheeler and his idea, supporting him so the relatively youthful developer could see his concept realised while developing his skills in a particular role.

"We can help make something commercially viable too," Leach says. "Our experience with lots of odd and unusual games [through BeefJack Magazine] has taught us a great deal about knowing who you're selling to. You can't really assume there's just a male 18–35-year-old target; it just doesn't work like that any more. So we can help look at who a game is being made for, and help with creating the right assets, or the way the game is being put together. That can be really be impactful when it comes to the release of a game."

The strength at the heart of BeefJack Create is its flexibility, and it means that there isn't really any such thing as a typical Create project. The story of **Dean Edwards** and his game *Iron Fish*, however, does plenty to capture the spirit and ideology that drives BeefJack's efforts. ▶

TO THE POWER OF ONE

A good idea was all Dean Edwards had – until he came across BeefJack Create

Dean Edwards had long dreamed of making his own game. He had ideas aplenty, and the will to work hard, but his lack of experience across game development's numerous disciplines meant that many of the conventional routes to market were closed to him. Then he discovered BeefJack Create, and partnered with the team to take *Iron Fish* from drawing board to reality.

"The hardest part for me was getting the project started," he explains. "With *Iron Fish*, I wanted to create a game that would appeal to the established and growing fanbase of horror games. As this is my first game, I was very nervous about getting it right. BeefJack has been incredibly supportive and really believed in the project right from the start, which inspired a confidence in me to deliver the best game *Iron Fish* can be."

Fast forward to the opening months of 2016, and Edwards has a game forged in Unreal Engine 4 that has met with the press and public at high-profile industry events, and is tantalisingly close to being released on PC and Mac. Not bad work for an individual at the beginning of his game development career.

WRITING BEEFJACK'S FUTURE

How its history in writing news, reviews and features for indie games continues to shape the core of BeefJack's DNA

While BeefJack Create is a far cry from the company's editorial website from 2008, the experience in writing about games has been fundamental in forming Create as a platform. It's particularly the case where getting Create projects noticed by players is concerned.

"Marketing is such a huge area of making a game successful, and we know it well through having run BeefJack Magazine ourselves," Leach explains. "For us, that's hugely helpful. It means we can help other studios, and engineer and pick out quirky projects that we see have the potential to reach a lot of people. That's where BeefJack Create and BeefJack Promote can really work in harmony with each other."

BeefJack Promote, a separate offering from the same company, provides marketing expertise and insight for games looking to reach broad, commercially viable audiences, and it's entirely possible to use in conjunction with Create, a pairing that makes

Iron Fish is a psychological thriller set in the deep sea that toys with the possibility of what might exist in the deepest crevices of Earth's many unexplored oceans. Designer Edwards is a recent graduate who, two years ago, was going through the process of looking for work, before forming a partnership with BeefJack to collaborate with the Create team.

"It's very rare for anyone starting out in the game industry to be able to create the project of their dreams as their first game," Edwards says. "I certainly didn't expect this opportunity to be available to me at such an early stage in my career. After I graduated from college in 2012, I began looking for jobs and opportunities around my area, with little success.

"It was at the beginning of 2014 – after years of looking for work – that I decided I would focus on designing my own games and expanding my contacts and experience within the industry, in the hope of fulfilling my ultimate goal to develop a project."

Without BeefJack Create, that would have been a great deal easier said than done.

"I've enjoyed working with BeefJack immensely," Edwards continues. "I feel very privileged, actually, to be working with some very talented and experienced people. They've added a lot of value to *Iron Fish* across the board – design, marketing, production and support. They've been great at showing me how the industry works and what it's like to bring a project to life from start to finish. I feel like I have already absorbed so much from working with them, and this experience has made me excited to learn more."

To an extent, the *Iron Fish* story can be understood as one of education through practical experience, though Edwards had no need to serve as a junior beginning a long climb up the career ladder, or a tester tackling the coalface of QA.

"A big part of what we do is provide education," Leach explains. "If this is your first time in the game industry, there are a lot of big players to understand, and it's a business. A lot of people with a great idea need somebody to hold their hand through that, and that's what we can do. We don't want any of our partners having it blow up in their face because they released something too soon, or a certain part wasn't good enough. A lot of our role is about nurturing and protecting those we partner with to ensure a game does as well as it can do."

While BeefJack Create is on hand to serve experienced and large-scale indie teams, and can even help with processes such as securing finance, it does provide something unusual to an audience largely ignored by the mainstream videogame industry – specifically an opportunity for entrepreneurial individuals to take a shortcut to fully fledged development, without any noteworthy sacrifice of quality.

"Dean was interested in being a game designer, and now he's seen our entire design process as we've worked with him," Leach says. "That's something many new game designers never get to see, and I think that's been really empowering for him. We gave Dean a massive head start with how to do all of this, and we've shown him a modern way to approach it all."

With the tools and specialists at BeefJack Promote on hand, the Create offering also extends to include a broad arrangement of marketing and promotion services. However, as it is with creating games, so it is with getting them to audiences, and as such 'bespoke' and 'flexible' remain keywords for how Leach and his team support Create partners in the delivery of titles to players.

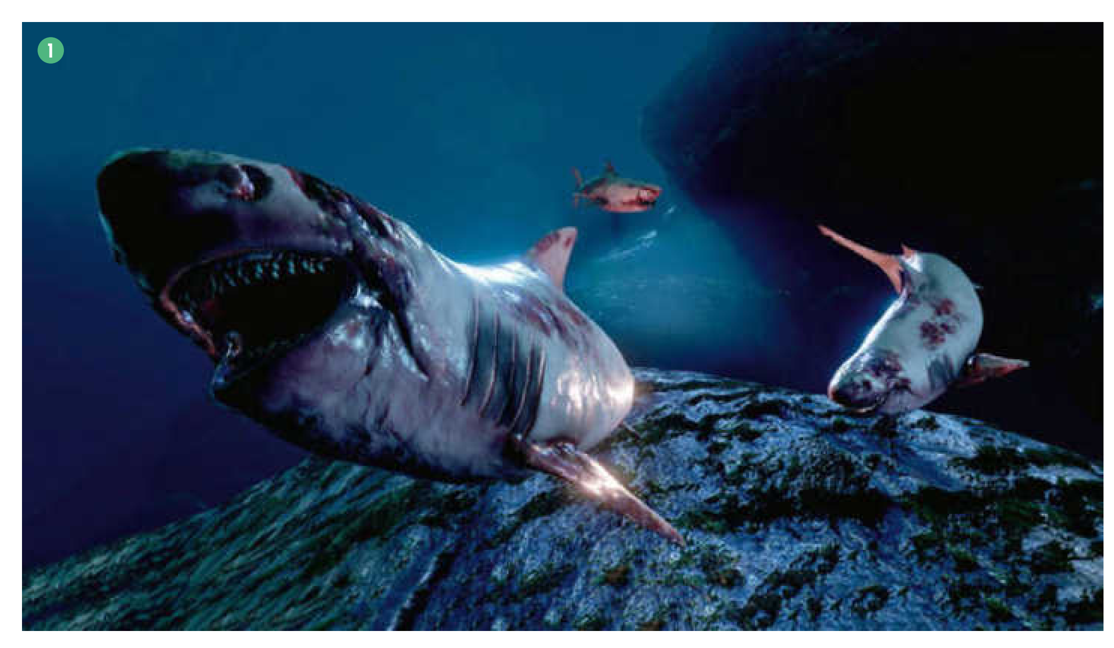
The service is platform-agnostic in its entirety, meaning that there's no agenda to push a particular game engine or technology, and no rigid rules in terms of the framework and pipeline structuring that serves a Create project. Whatever works best for the game, individual or team partnering with BeefJack guides development, with the company's experts poised to give advice and input when required rather than insist on a certain methodology or piece of technology.

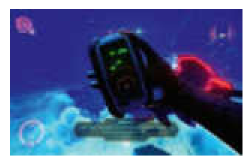
All of which means that there isn't a typical BeefJack Create project, even though what everything has in common is the company's taste for independently minded games and a focus on collaborative development. That makes its services applicable to a wide range of people, from budding designers with fledgling game ideas to seasoned developers, including those who may consider themselves far from ready to begin real work on their first full game.

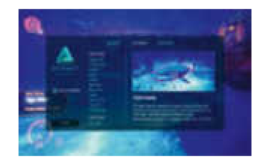
"Perhaps you're a person on a mission, with one game idea that you'd really like to explore, or one area of game development that you'd really like to explore," Leach says. "We offer a pretty neat way to be able to do that, see results, and have a far more accomplished game. And you can actually learn a whole load of stuff along the way."

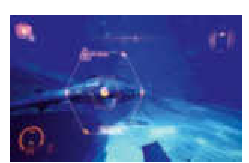
For Leach, all the variety and flexibility that defines BeefJack Create needn't make explaining the service a complex proposition. "We're just empowering others to make great games," he says. ■

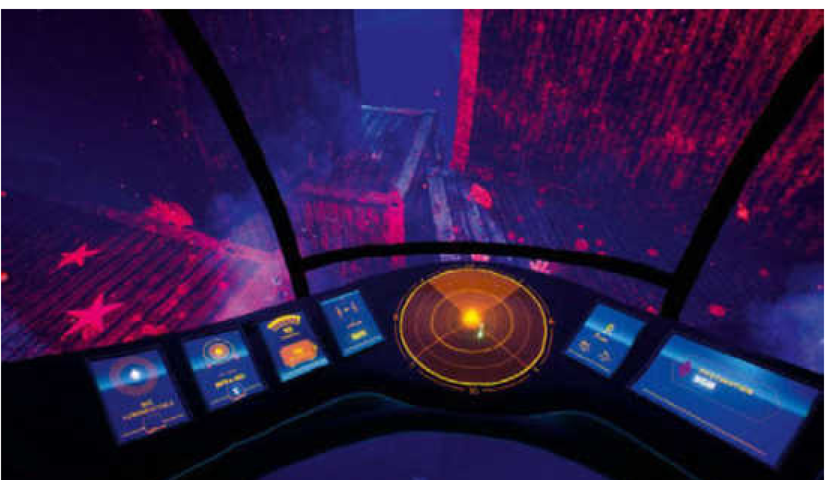
"THEY'VE BEEN GREAT AT SHOWING ME HOW THE INDUSTRY WORKS AND WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BRING A PROJECT TO LIFE FROM START TO FINISH"



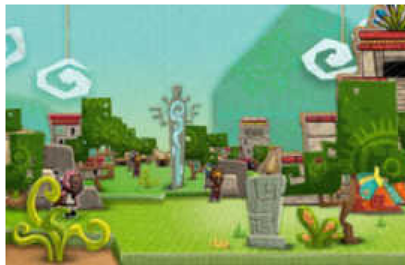












1 Described as a psychological deep-sea thriller, *Iron Fish* sees you assume the role of an investigator using state-of-the-art equipment seven miles beneath the ocean waves. Unreal Engine 4 helps to bring its creatures to life against mysterious backdrops. 2 James Wheeler's *Chieftain's Challenge* melds *Angry Birds*, crazy golf and a captivating, many-layered art style. Brands can sponsor areas of the game





JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

As someone who plays games I have to admit I'm a sucker for the simple tricks devs play. The Christmas trees and snow that crop up in online games during the festive season. The nods to other games and even to the popular culture of the time. Yep, it can all get a bit meta and date awkwardly, but I find it endears the creators to me.

Earlier in the year I was tasked with adding some DLC in this vein for Valentine's Day. A sultry vixen love interest nonplayer character was required in a game for the players to fall in love with. Yes, I know the many obvious problems here. You don't have to roll your eyes.

I explained to the team that females also play games, and nobody ever falls in love with the sultry NPCs. Nobody ever falls in love with videogame characters full stop. Unless it's the love you feel for a brave German Shepherd or a leave-no-man-behind platoon leader. But nope, we have to create this gorgeous vision of shimmering loveliness and get it in by February.

I have to say, the results surpassed my expectations. Lucy, I decided, would have a no-nonsense tough personality. She'd allude to having carved her own path through the game before cropping up. She'd also give out info that the player might not know. A few little bonuses and even an unlock code or two. For this reason if no other, I thought the player would want her around.

Then I tried playing my masterstroke. I created lines of dialogue that made it clear she was keen on the player. Such were the mechanics of the game, the player could in fact do nothing about this, but, because I'm a bear of little brain, I hoped the unrequited, never-to-be element would cause love to flower in the hearts of all those playing the game.

What actually happened when she was in and being tested was very different. Instead of her being smart, confident, useful and alluring, the verdict from all who experienced her was that she was extremely annoying. Passions among those who did missions with her ran high, but not in any way romantically. Plans were made to drop her but we had a better idea. She was to stay, irritate the player then was to be killed by enemies in a senselessly satisfying way. Once she was gone, we would find a scrap of diary in which she professed her love for the player. Plus give a load more useful info on how to proceed. I didn't want that last bit but the team did, so in it went.



People repeat themselves in real life, but hearing the exact same line in a game makes my teeth itch

We were left with a love story that never was, a relationship doomed from the start with an irksome NPC and some fairly decent tips on what to do next. It somehow felt right. And what I liked was that finding a character annoying, or funny, or simply interesting is the key. Love and hate don't translate well to game characters. Ain't, as the saying goes, nobody got time for that. But to engender some feeling is great. The big fail is to create something or someone nobody even has an opinion on, and Lord knows I've done a few of those over the years.

Chiefly, though, bothering to acknowledge some real-life annual event in a game sends the message to those playing it that the team are still there, they still care and they value you as a customer enough to spend hours doing something for you. Even if the result is an overbearing, soon-to-expire woman in a crop top and covered in tattoos.

So what next? Deliberately make our characters annoying because it's at least a reaction? No, I think this was a one-off and we got away with it. Writing for the audience and hoping they have the visceral responses you want is the road to madness. The characters have to be what they are. My trade secret – well, not a secret now – is to give them four traits. Four elements that define their personalities, and to have one of those change during their journey through the game. It isn't always possible, but it's satisfying when it happens. Occasionally have them say something pseudo-profound and, probably most of all, give them names that people aren't embarrassed to say out loud in the playground, park or pub. The truth is, I'm never really sure how much people care. It's rare for me to listen to a character in a game I've had nothing to do with and not simply judge the quality of the writing and the voice acting. And to cringe when I hear the same line twice in game. People do repeat themselves in real life, but hearing the exact same line in a game makes my teeth itch, so irritating Lucy, at least, never did, even when she was getting raked by enemy fire. And now she's dead and we all have to live with that. Until Easter. Ooh, I've just had an idea…

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

Illustration **box-kite-curve.com**



#292
April 4

